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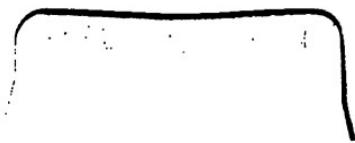
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James Boy

by the author

W.H. Tracy, author of "The Great Seal" and "The





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TOM'S BOY

BY THE AUTHOR OF "MISS TOOSEY'S
MISSION"

MISS TOOSEY'S MISSION,	MY HONEY.
LADDIE, AND PRIS.	OUR LITTLE ANNE.
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He pushed open the sitting-room door with an excited little cry.
Frontispiece.

BEST BOY

BY JAMES R. MITCHELL

ILLUSTRATED BY HENRY C. WOOD

CHARLES LITTLE
THE CHILDREN'S PRESS



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1900



TOM'S BOY

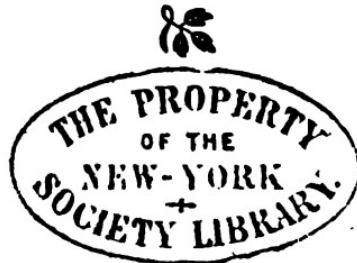
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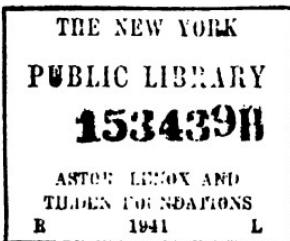
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TOM'S BOY

CHAPTER I

FOG

He makes a July day short as December;
And with his varying childness, cures in me
Thoughts that would thick the blood. — SHAKESPEARE.

FOUR o'clock on a dull November day, with the small amount of light, that has penetrated through the fog during the day, withdrawing its feeble assistance from the gas-lamps which have been burning all day in a half-hearted, melancholy manner, as if conscious that the circle of their influence was contemptibly small.

From the dingy window of a house in a small street in Bloomsbury, the outlook, which had been very gloomy all day, grew decidedly more so when you could no longer see the baker's shop on the other side of the road a little way down, with its rows of pale loaves in the window and the board of the Parcels Delivery Company with the red cart depicted on it.

Still less could you see beyond it the public-house at the corner, or the fossil old cabman in an oilskin cape, who seemed to pass his whole existence leaning against the wall there; or the nosebag of his equally

fossil horse, which could occasionally be descried round the corner being tossed up in strenuous efforts to arrive at the few remaining oats, or whatever provender cab-horses are regaled with, that might still lurk in the corners.

So you could only guess the destination of the small girls with large jugs who came into the dim circle of light from the gas-lamp, and could not watch them push open the swing-door of the jug and bottle entrance with the elbow of an habitué, and issue forth again with a full jug, stopping to blow off the froth and taste its contents at the first doorstep.

Much watching from that dingy dining-room window opposite had made Susie Bannister deeply versed in the habits of the neighborhood, and she might have supplied valuable statistics to temperance orators if her observation had not been so very listless and desultory.

Passers-by whose business took them along Corsham Street habitually, grew familiar with the girl's face looking over the shabby wire blind, and the old-clothes man and the cat's-meat man had ceased to regard her as an intending customer; and even the organ-man, who found these shabby Bloomsbury streets such a happy hunting-ground—far more remunerative than their more affluent neighbors farther west—ceased to take off his hat and show his white teeth in an insinuating grin to that unresponsive face at the window.

And yet it was quite a pretty face if there had been more animation about it—fair, with a dimple in the

softly curved cheek, and a childish, pouting little mouth, and round blue eyes with curled lashes. There was something suggestive of a daisy about her — and one associates a daisy with spring, sunshine and larks singing and young lambs frisking about, and not with a fusty London lodging on a foggy November day. Some one was making this reflection somewhat bitterly as he looked up from the table where he sat writing under the gas, only one burner lighted out of consideration for the extras in the weekly bill.

He could not see her face, however, but only the pretty, untidy hair, a plait of which had fallen on to the collar of her not over clean cotton blouse, which looked too thin and summerish for the day. There was also a want of trimness in the belt round the slim, young waist; and the skirt below dragged down and showed a hiatus, which the rather irritable eyes at the table noticed with that indefinite masculine appreciation of something wrong with the gathers.

This critical beholder was not, however, in a position to throw stones, seeing that he was distinctly in need of a razor and had no tie on, and the cuffs of his shirt were beginning to fray at the edges. The unshaven face was quite young, not more than five-and-twenty one might guess, though it was a little bit haggard and careworn for that usually light-hearted age. It was a good-looking face, too, with dark eyes deep set under wide straight brows, and a short nose cut rather square at the end, as was also the firm chin, while the mouth had an odd way of drawing down

at the corners like the mouth of a horse when it is suddenly reined in.

He had been sitting all day writing at the table under the gas, and had that jaded, strained look that people not used to a sedentary life get so soon even after a few hours of uninterrupted indoors existence ; and the long legs stretched out under the table gave an impatient jerk now and then, as if they would fain have discarded the slippers and put on thick boots and gaiters, and gone for a tramp with a dog at their heels over meadows and through copses, where the oak-leaves hang brown and crisp, and the brambles are orange and crimson, and the bracken yellow and gold. Why, even a November day with a gun on your shoulder is worth living ; and if those impatient legs had been hankering after those delights, they had communicated the longing to the tired head and hand, for the latter stopped its scratching hurry and began picking at the frayed shirt-cuff—an operation not likely to improve matters—and the eyes looked away for a minute beyond the listless girl's figure in the window and away through the yellow fog outside, over miles and miles of streets and suburbs and hills and dales to a certain gorse cover out of which the hounds are breaking with the pleasant, bell-like cry that is such music in the ear of the fox-hunter. There are pink coats to be seen through the trees, and, nearer, a pair of chestnut ears pricked and alert and taking in the meaning of the cry as well, and as anxious to be off and away as the rider who feels the quiver and excitement in the delicate mouth that answers so

readily to his hand, and in the glossy sides against which his knees press—those impatient legs no longer in gaiters and thick boots as a minute ago, but in buckskins and tops.

And then the girl in the window began humming a tune and tossing the dirty tassel of the blind backwards and forwards, and he came back with a start to the present and found the ink dry in his pen and the drift of the sentence lost.

I said he had been writing uninterruptedly all day; but such was not quite the case, as, in the middle of the day, just as he was warming to his subject, the slipshod maid-of-all-work had pushed open the door with a large tray, and he had to clear away his writing to allow of the dingy cloth being spread, blotting some of his pages and mislaying others, and losing altogether the go and impetus that at last seemed to have come to the hesitating pen and the dull, heavy mind directing it.

This clearing away for dinner would have been a yet more intolerable nuisance if it had not been for a place laid at one side of the table in front of a high chair, for some one whose requirements at table seemed limited to a teaspoon and a mug with "A present for a good boy" on it; and the frown that had gathered on the still boyish forehead cleared away when the owner of the high chair was carried in and planted in it, in that delightful solemn condition in which children wake up from their morning sleep, with dewy, wide-open eyes and comfortable little yawns, and a very clean pinafore,

and curls glistening from the application of a wet brush.

Such a bright presence went far to make up for dingy circumstances, for the dirty tablecloth and greasy mutton, and for the handles of the knives which always felt rough, and for the crooked prongs of the forks. And yet Tom Bannister sometimes thought that Boy's golden head brought the hideousness of its environment into more painful evidence, and that he could have borne it all with greater equanimity if he could have borne it alone ; and he would feel a great passion of indignation against fate and himself for the heritage that this son of his was born to.

"He is such a thoroughbred little beggar!" he would say to himself, with a bitter little laugh at the appropriateness of the epithet he had used in fun. "So clean cut, so well built, with a certain dignified baby grace about him, and dainty little airs of condescension that have a funny effect of nobility about them."

He was as different as possible from the flabby, slobbering treasure of the same age downstairs who was the apple of the landlady's eye — whose big head rolled about on its puny little neck, and whose eyes goggled deprecatingly when he was accused in admiring tones of being "a rogue," or "a Turk," or "an artful young gentleman."

Boy was three years old, and taking in great draughts of learning every day and hour of his young life. If you come to think of it, how much

those first few years of a child's life teach him: more than we can acquire in after life by the most arduous study, close application and consumption of midnight oil; a baby child is taking in and making its own every minute of the day.

Tom Bannister used to go back and try and remember his own early childhood in order to understand some of Boy's opinions and difficulties. He could not go back as far as Boy's present age; it was a dangerous and exasperating endeavor altogether, for his own childhood had been in such different circumstances to Boy's, in such a beautiful old home, surrounded by such love, not only father's and mother's — Boy had that, he would reiterate, to its highest degree — but grandparents and sisters and uncles and aunts and old servants and family retainers, all encompassing his young life with an atmosphere of love and interest.

But it did not do to think of it if he did not wish to get wild at the injustice that visits the sins of the father on the children, and shut Boy out into the outer darkness of Corsham Street.

"He is exactly the little chap to take the pater's fancy. He 's such a plucky youngster, and pluck always fetched the governor. And, by Jove ! would n't Boy like the dogs and the horses? And that would just go to the pater's heart."

But the pater's heart was not a subject to be dwelt upon by one who was shut out from that heart for good and all; and the picture that cruel sorcerer, imagination, conjured up of Boy mounted before the old

squire on his hunter, flourishing the hunting-crop, or, again, interviewing, fearless and therefore with impunity, the big, fierce old retriever, Diver, in his kennel, took the spirit out of the high-mettled hunter on whose shoulder Boy had such exciting rides to hounds round and round the little sitting-room in Corsham Street, and dulled the amusement of watching Boy's intercourse with the thin lodging-house cat, who allowed herself to be carried about, held firmly round the waist, without turning a tabby hair.

When dinner-time and a game with Boy were over, Tom settled down to his writing again, vainly trying to pick up dropped threads and to remember what he was leading up to by that last enigmatical sentence. But his attention was distracted from time to time by the voices in the next room, to which mother and son had retired to leave Tom to his work. Through the thin wall of the ill-built house voices were very audible, and the fretful tone in Boy's and the impatient answers from his mother irritated the listener beyond all endurance.

"He's such a good little chap. It's as easy as anything to keep him happy. It's no use always thwarting a child; but it's just like two children together, teasing one another and quarrelling over their toys."

"Hullo, there!" he called out, more than once rapping on the wall. "What's the matter with Boy?"

And then there would be quiet in the next room for a time; and then the squabbling was renewed,

till Tom could endure it no longer, and marched into the other room and picked up Boy from the hearthrug, with a quivering under-lip and smeared cheeks and resentful glances and indistinct accusations of the other child, who looked nearly as pitiful and babyish and as nearly on the brink of tears.

"He's a naughty boy, and it's a shame to humor him as you do."

"Oh, bother the naughtiness! I can't get on a bit with all this shindy going on in the next room. Here, Boy must be good and as still as a mouse, and daddy will cut him a great big gee-gee."

So Boy was planted before the fire in the next room, and tears and a little button nose wiped up quickly with daddy's handkerchief, and a strange object, somewhat resembling the Berkshire white horse, cut out of a piece of paper afterwards found to contain some memoranda important to the work in progress. It was then that the girl took up her position at the window, watching the fog settle down on the dingy street.

"Well," she said, "it's not my fault if you don't get a minute's peace with that child in the room."

But Boy, in that aggravating way children have of putting their elders in the wrong, behaved excellently, first of all being engrossed with the mysterious paper quadruped provided for his amusement, and then finding much entertainment from the waste-paper basket, which was in a state of high congestion from not having been emptied for several days, and contained a good many surprising and un-

expected things which made explorations therein interesting.

And after this, when an interval of silence led Tom to look down, Boy was asleep, with one round, rosy cheek on the untidy carpet hassock, out of which the straw was protruding.

Boy was certainly not to blame if his father's attention wandered from his writing to the hillside and the covert and the pink and the view halloo and the cry of the hounds, from which, as I have said, he was recalled by the girl at the window beginning to hum an air and toss the tassel aimlessly backwards and forwards.

The air she hummed was a particularly irritating one to him — an inane music-hall tune, with associations far less wholesome and breezy and refreshing than those the air interrupted, and it seemed to get on his nerves and fidget him beyond all endurance, combined with the swing of the tassel that was made to mark the rhythm of the song.

He was wondering how he could get her to leave off without hurting her feelings — poor child ! she had enough to put up with without that ! — when she herself stopped suddenly in the very middle of the verse and let the tassel swing itself gradually still, and said, “I think I 'll go out for a bit and get a little fresh air.”

“In the fog?”

“Oh, it 's not so bad now ; and I won't go far. Just along Tottenham Court Road and into Oxford Street. Now the shops are lighted it makes it more cheerful.”

She came and stood by the table, looking so childish and like the baby asleep on the hassock below, that it was no wonder that Tom could not regard her as a reasonable human being, arrived at years of discretion—a wife, moreover, who had taken this man for her wedded husband with all the duties involved, and was, besides, that wonderful holy thing, a mother, with all its sacred responsibilities, one of those whom all Christian generations shall call “blessed” for the sake of that one Mother at Bethlehem.

“Poor little girl!” he said, running his inky fingers through his hair, which was just that quarter inch too long which gives such an unkempt and ill-groomed look to a man. “Poor little Susie! It’s awfully dull for you. I wish I could take you out for a bit; but if I don’t get this wretched old writing done we sha’n’t have much butter to our bread, and the chances are that I get the sack too, for there are half a dozen fellows on the lookout for my berth, and fellows who could do the work a jolly sight better. Well, cheer up, old girl, there ’ll be better times coming, and we ’ll be all the jollier then for being down on our luck now. Run away and have a prowl round among the shops, and I ’ll see after the brat.”

She was a little compunctionous at leaving him, and lingered a few minutes arranging her hair before the little fly-blown glass over the chimneypiece, and coaxing the curls on her forehead to a more orderly disorder.

"If you'd nearly done," she said hesitatingly, "I'd wait—"

"Oh, it's no good waiting," he said rather irritably; "I don't seem like finishing it till midnight.— Oh! I should think your fringe would do; there's no one likely to see you in such a fog."

"And you don't care how I look," she retorted petulantly. "I might go about a regular figure for all you'd notice."

And then he had to make amends and coax her out of her pettish displeasure, and help her on with her coat, and tie the smart little veil, which somehow did not seem to him quite appropriate for going out unattended in the foggy streets.

Well, perhaps he was repaid by the arm round his neck and the kiss on the top of his head, and the smiling face that leant over the railings and nodded good-bye to him; but this interruption was not conducive to finishing off that London letter, that must be smart and up-to-date, and give the impression to admiring country readers of having been written by some one in the very thick of society, conversant with all the gossip of the clubs and the latest *bons mots* of the highest aristocracy.

Tom Bannister was right when he said that there were many who would have done it "a jolly sight better" than he did; for he had not got over the feeling of self-contempt and disgust at the sham knowingness and smartness, and at the scraps of news picked up anyhow, backstairs or keyhole (so to speak), and dished up with a spice of scandal or an

innuendo carefully kept short of the libellous, and aimed at this one or that according to the politics of the paper to be supplied.

Worst of all, this must be ready for the country post at six ; but perhaps it was quite as well there was not unlimited time to consider each sentence and despise himself for catering for such vulgar tastes, or else perhaps those pages might have joined the others in the waste-paper basket in which Boy had been burrowing with such satisfaction.

Well, poor folks cannot afford to be squeamish ! and he must buckle to if that London letter was to be posted in time to tickle the mental palates of the farmers on market-day at Medington, and make their wives and daughters feel, while they read it, as if they were themselves on the fringe of the great world of fashion with this weekly little peep behind the scenes which Tom Bannister gave them.

CHAPTER II

A RETROSPECT

One step 'twixt loss and gain !
The summit to attain,
So near the brink of Pain
Hath joy to go. — BLISS CARMAN.

AND while Tom Bannister is trying his best to be smart, we will take a quick look back over the last five years of his life and trace the process which had led from Donnington Hall to Corsham Street ; from being a spoilt and flattered young heir to a big estate, possessed of everything heart could desire or money could buy, to an impecunious literary hack, with hardly heart enough to desire anything, and if he did, no money to get it ; from the well-groomed, dandy young undergraduate at Oxford to this unshaven man with frayed wristbands that we have seen to-day.

An only son, with a fond mother and three elder sisters all combining to make much of him ; and the old squire, though he pretended to be more sensible than his women-folk, perhaps the worst of the lot in spoiling the young hero, who was certainly good-looking and plucky, and bright beyond all his compeers — capital across country, a first-rate shot, rowing in his college boat.

"And, by Jove, sir!" the old man would say when he grew confidential, "it's just the same with his books. He takes his exams. just as he does his fences, and where other fellows make no end of a boggle he goes straight ahead. He'll show some of them the way, no fear!"

But at last a fence came in young Tom Bannister's career at which, perhaps, it would have been better for all concerned if he had curbed in that impetuous steed of self-will or determination or pluck, or whatever it might be called, and considered the country that lay beyond before making the irretrievable leap into what may perchance turn out to be that uneasy country of repenting at leisure, stretching away to the distant horizon of "till death do them part."

Tom might not have taken that leap over the hedge of matrimony (I think it was a hedge covered with wild-roses and May-flowers to the young fellow's enraptured fancy, so my hunting simile does not hold good in this respect) if the old squire would have left him alone to his own common-sense, — for even a boy of twenty in desperate love has some of that commodity. But, to return to the hunting-field, the very surest way to send Tom over the stiffest fence or five-barred gate was to tell him he could not do it and would be a fool to try ; and before the words of wisdom were well out of your mouth he would be nodding to you triumphantly from the next field and galloping away across the turf.

There had never been a hint of dissipation ; his life had all along been quite above-board and simple,

open-air and straightforward. He was not a bit sentimentally inclined ; he knew all the girls round in a jolly, friendly, good-comrade sort of way, and at the tenants' ball he would dance with the farmers' daughters and the village girls, and kiss them now and again under the mistletoe, and they would say, "For shame, Master Tom !" and there was an end of it.

So when in some roundabout way — that odd way in which evil reports creep round — a whisper came of a pretty music-hall singer with whom Tom was smitten, the old squire pooh-poohed it altogether, and would not listen to it, and rated Mrs. Bannister soundly for looking a little bit wistful and troubled. "Well," he said testily, "I should have thought you would have been the last to believe a trumped-up story like that about Tom !"

But by and by that creeping reptile, which the squire had so indignantly trampled down, and, as he thought, crushed for good and all, raised its ugly head again. Scandal has many heads, and is not easily killed when once it is hatched ; and after that, from one source and another, confirmatory evidence dropped in — now from a chance word from an acquaintance, with a meaning look, now in the letter of a friend, with a note of concern in it which carried the shaft deeper, and left it rankling because it was plainly not winged by malice.

And the name, too, kept turning up in all directions. "Susie Primrose." Why, all the sixty years of his life the squire had never troubled himself about

music-hall singers. Stars in that firmament had risen and attained a certain amount of fame, and then had set and sunk into oblivion, and rising and setting, fame and oblivion had been all as one to the squire ; but now, in nearly every paper he took up, the name seemed to catch his eye, and he could not get away from it.

And yet this Susie Primrose was not a star of the first magnitude by any means ; it was only because his eye was sharpened by the anxiety he so strongly reprobated in his wife that it detected the name in advertisements and on posters.

"The Sisters Primrose." "Susie and May."
"The Little Sisters."

He grew more grumpy and irritable every day, and at last electrified his family by flinging down the county newspaper with a very unparliamentary expression, and declaring he would not have any more humbug about it but should just write a line to Tom to know if there was a spark of truth in all this rot.

So he wrote off in hot haste, and his letter arrived at a most unlucky moment, when Tom's heart was in all the wild delirium of first love, not softened down by any previous mild flirtations, not inoculated (so to speak) to take the disease mildly by boyish loves or childish romance. Susie's round blue eyes, looking shyly into his, seemed the only eyes in all the world for him, and to hold all there was of sacred or sweet or worth living for. So to his father's rather ill-judged and blustering effusion and demand to know what was all this rubbish that he

heard about a music-hall girl, Tom wrote back that if he had been fortunate enough to win the love of as sweet and pure a lady as could be found anywhere, a girl whom his mother and sisters might be proud to welcome to their home, he did not see why any one need object.

That letter of Tom's nearly brought on a fit, and I do not think the old squire was ever quite the same afterwards; certainly he was very different after that interview with Tom which took place the following day. Tom was out when the squire arrived at St. Faith's and went up to his son's rooms — those pleasant, easy-going rooms looking out into the old quad, with plenty of pretty things about, but none of the gimcracks and finikin ornaments that make some men's room so ladylike. There were evidences of an open-air, breezy life, as well as books and pictures and statuary, cups he had won rowing, riding-whips, cricket bats.

But the squire walked straight to a large photograph in an oxydized silver frame on a small table close beside the deep armchair, on which table lay also an open book and a pipe.

It was the photograph of a young girl, almost a child, with a cloud of soft fair hair falling over her shoulders, simply dressed with a pinafore over her frock, and a large sun-bonnet hanging from her hand. She was looking straight out of the photograph, so that her eyes met yours wherever you might be — very sweet, tender-looking, innocent eyes gazing out of a round, childish face.

The squire was still looking at it when Tom came springing up the stairs whistling a tune — by the way, it was the same tune that Susie was humming that foggy afternoon as she stood in the window. He came up behind his father, and the eyes of both men looked down on the girl's photograph. "Yes," said Tom softly, as if in answer to an unspoken question ; "yes, that is Susie."

I sometimes wonder whether if the squire had had more tact — if he had kept his temper, and had not raged and stormed — whether things might have been different ; but such wonders are very futile, and you cannot make a silk purse out of a sow's ear, nor a skilful diplomatist out of an angry country squire whose heart is in passionate revolt at what he regarded as the degradation of his only son.

The more he stormed the more set and determined grew the face so like his own opposite to him.

And then his evil genius prompted him to say something contemptuous of the girl and the profession she followed ; and then Tom's mouth drew down at the corner like a horse reined in, but it was not to control but to urge forward the impulsive words :

"I must ask you to speak respectfully of my future wife."

"You mean to marry her?"

"Certainly."

Then there was a silence ; and the squire took up his gloves from the chair where he had tossed them and began putting them on with rather trembling fin-

gers, and he took his hat and made as if he were going out without another word.

But at the door he stopped. I fancy if he had said "Tom!" then, or Tom had said "Father!" it might have come all right: but Tom's eyes were still riveted on that childish, round face, and the squire cleared his throat with a bit of an effort and spoke in dry, matter-of-fact tones. "Perhaps it may save future trouble if we clearly understand the position of affairs as regards the property. You are not aware, probably, that your grandfather and I disentailed the property, and it was not resettled, so that it is absolutely in my power to leave as I think best."

This was the finishing touch — the spur, as it were — that sent this restive young steed flying over that undesirable fence. A threat "put his monkey up," as he would have expressed it.

I do not think, as a matter of fact, he had actually realized till that moment that his inheritance was so absolutely at the disposal of his father. He had no doubt heard of the cutting of the entail; there was no concealment about it. The old squire was rather fond of talking about it, having a few legal phrases that he was a little proud of airing; but as to its making any difference to Tom, I do not believe they either of them thought of it for a moment. In all their talks of the future it was taken for granted that Tom would follow his father in the property and estates as naturally as Tuesday follows Monday, or June follows May; indeed, the squire sometimes talked of

what Tom would do when he came into the estates, as if he himself would be there to see when there was a young squire at Donnington, and another name on the great family tomb at Donnington church.

But any one might have thought that Tom had fully realized the fact, and all along counted the cost of displeasing his father by the cool indifference with which he replied "Yes! What then?" and began filling his pipe with fingers that perhaps were not more steady than the squire's.

And the squire, without another word, turned and went, and Tom heard him going heavily down the staircase; and, full as he was of anger and resentment, and determination to have his own way, he noticed — at least he remembered afterwards — that the spring and vigor had gone out of the step, and that it was that of an older and a disappointed man.

Now the Bannisters of Donnington had always been reckoned obstinate characters — firmness, their friends called it; pig-headedness, their enemies — and when it concerned other people they generally got their way through sheer obstinacy and tenacity; but when one Bannister will was pitted against another the tug-of-war became tense.

Tom was too desperately in love just then to listen to reason, and even if he had not been so, I think he would have felt a cur if he had been deterred by such a paltry consideration as that of losing Donnington and six thousand a year.

I wonder if the estates had still been entailed, and he had been bound to come into them whoever he

married, and if his father had just said, "Tom, for my sake and your mother's think twice of it," whether it would have made any difference. Well, who can say?

Anyhow, Tom went down the middle of that term ; and while men were still wondering what had become of him, and what was up, an announcement appeared in the papers of the marriage of "Thomas, only son of Thomas Bannister of Donnington, Esq., to Susan Mary, only daughter of the late Jonathan Wilmot of Bristol, Esq."

"By Jove!" the men at St. Faith's College said.
"Do you see that? Who is she?"

"Why, don't you know? It's that little Susie Primrose — one of the two that used to sing that ripping duet about larks and daisies, and look so jolly simple in a pinafore and sun-bonnet."

"Can't be that. It says only daughter."

"Why, you crock! They were n't sisters; it was only the make-up."

"How do his people take it?"

"Pretty hard, I've heard. Fine old fellow his governor, but as proud as Lucifer, and thinking no end of his family. Good old county family, you know — came over with the Conqueror, and all the rest of it. Poor old boy! it's a big come down for him!"

"And what a fool the fellow must have been!"

CHAPTER III

ALL FOR LOVE

They, hand in hand, with wand'ring steps and slow,
Through Eden took their solitary way.—MILTON.

THE men at St. Faith's were right in saying that Susie and May Primrose were not sisters; but it was not merely the make-up that made them appear so wonderfully alike — they were cousins, and had more natural resemblance to one another than is often to be seen between sisters.

Nor was the simplicity and innocence of the girls merely make-up either, though, of course, all was done to enhance the effect of it when the two girls stood side by side in the glare of the footlights, with a rustic scene behind, and sang a simple little song about daisies and spring, set to a pretty air that had caught on to the capricious taste of the music-hall frequenters, who, the next minute, would as rapturously applaud the nods and becks and wreathed smiles, the meaning looks and *risqué* inuendoes of a very different style of performer.

And from the music-hall the air had crept out into the streets and was whistled by street-boys and ground out on organs, and had that short and often unaccountable popularity that some tunes enjoy, meeting the ear at every turn with wearisome itera-

tion, and then of a sudden — an observer may sometimes mark the very day and almost the hour — it falls into utter oblivion, out of the memory of mortal man or street-boy, and another song reigns in its stead.

Perhaps even the transitory popularity of simplicity and innocence may be beneficial, and certainly no harm could have been done to the crowds who, every night at the Caledon, clapped and shouted and stamped applause while the two girls stood hand in hand, looking a little more scared and wondering and shy than they really felt — casting down their blue eyes and fingering a corner of their pinafores in a manner that was quite natural at first, and then grew to be part of the performance.

They used to blush at first, but that, of course, could not be done to order, and, in the natural course of events, passed off after the first few performances. But, for the main part, they really were what they appeared, two country girls, with Nature only just a very little improved on.

The manager had come upon them by chance, singing at a temperance meeting in the heart of the country, and with some misgivings as to how they might suit the jaded, vitiated taste of the London public, had brought them up to London and produced them at the Caledon, and had found the venture successful beyond his wildest expectations. But being a conscientious sort of man, according to his lights and advantage clearly coinciding with duty in the matter — seeing that innocence and simplicity

were the girls' principal stock-in-trade — he took good care of them and would not let them drop into all the bewildering dangers and intoxicating temptations of London life, but put them under the care of an old woman, who looked after them in a kindly, sharp, motherly way, and went about with them and steered their little, inexperienced craft through the shoals and quicksands that surrounded them.

"I won't have them spoilt," the manager said ; "and if I find there's any humbugging going on, I'll send them straight back to the hole I dug them out of. And besides, they won't be worth their salt if they lose their freshness and pick up townified airs and graces."

So that night when Tom first saw Susie, and was stirred to the very soul by the sight of something so fresh and pure and simple among all the glitter and gas and tinsel and meretricious brilliancy, he was not so ridiculously taken in as most people imagined ; nor was he so absolutely right as he imagined himself.

Some friend of his had persuaded him to come up to town, and they had turned into the Caledon after dinner. Music-halls were not much in Tom's line, and he only went because Fate was keen on it ; while he himself would rather have "done" a theatre. He was a little bit sleepy and decidedly bored by the first part of the entertainment, and he was just going to suggest that they should "chuck" the rest and come out, when there was a sort of hush of expectancy through the hall, which had been filling up as

if for some special point in the programme, and the orchestra began playing a simple, almost childish melody. And then Fate said, "By Jove!" and Tom became aware of two little girls standing in front of the stage with serious young faces and blue eyes looking shyly out on the sea of upturned faces, and then of two fresh, clear voices, sweet and pure as a blackbird's in the spring, and as natural and unaffected.

What was there in the song? Nothing much. I expect it would be impossible now to find it among dusty second-hand music or heaps of waste-paper; and if we found it I doubt if we could make out the charm that kept that crowded hall in breathless silence till the three simple verses were ended and the last flute-like notes died away, and the orchestra conductor's baton that had been raised, awaiting the end of the long, soft, concluding note, fell, and the violins took up the refrain, though they might have saved themselves the trouble seeing that not a sound was audible in the roar of applause that drowned the orchestra, bursting out again and again till the manager, very smiling and paternal in his manner, led back the two girls, who had hastily made their exit with a scared little courtesy when the song was finished. Then another silence, and the same song repeated, and again tremendous applause; and some flowers thrown, which the girls appeared too frightened to pick up, till the manager came forward and put them into the pinnyfores gathered up to receive them.

And then the drop-scene came down, and the

next turn of the programme was coming on, and Tom drew a long breath and got up and followed his friend out into the street with a good half of the audience, who had only stayed — and many of them only come — for this duet.

He was hardly conscious what he was doing or what Fate was talking about, and happily some of the comments of those leaving the hall at the same time fell unheeded on his ear — for to the impure all things are impure, and the reverse of the blessing to the pure in heart shows to the impure the evil one in all they look upon.

"I'm sorry, old fellow," Fate said, "you should have been so bored. For my part I rather liked those two little girls, they looked so jolly simple. It was uncommonly well done."

And Tom said never a word, but got away from Fate as soon as he could to escape from jarring interruptions, and to let himself go and give himself over to that strange, bright spell that seemed to have been cast upon him by a pair of innocent-looking eyes which had met his — yes, he was confident they had met his — across that crowded hall, and had transformed sensible, rather matter-of-fact Tom Bannister to this sentimental, love-sick youth who patrolled out-of-the-way, quiet suburban streets till the small hours. More than one policeman's bull's-eye was turned on him suspiciously during his wanderings, as was also the eye of the porter at the hotel when he came in just as the dawn was making the gas look dim and dissipated.

"Hullo, Bannister, off your feed?" Fate said next morning over the unappreciated kidneys and bacon. "I never saw such a chap to be knocked over by one day in London. There would n't be much left of you at the end of the season! Well, never mind, old chap, the harriers meet to-morrow."

Certainly, if one day in town upset Tom Bannister so completely, it was unaccountable that he should be travelling up again very shortly afterwards, and that his visits should have been repeated again and again on one pretext or another, till Bannister's visits to his dentist became quite a standing joke among his friends at St. Faith's, and the white row of teeth, he showed so liberally when he laughed, were regarded—or his friends feigned so to regard them—as a triumphant work of art and a splendid advertisement of the skill of their manipulator.

But Tom's laughs were not quite as frequent as of yore, and he did not turn up as regularly at the meets as he used, and altogether he was not such a simple and easily reckoned up figure in life's sum, love having a way of introducing complications which may well puzzle the wisest mathematicians. He did not confide in any one, or make any attempt to get an introduction, or do anything more than go to the Caledon whenever he got a chance and take a stall as near as possible to the place where he and Fate had sat that first night. He would go early, and stoically endure a long programme of inane and wearisome performances—though, for that matter,

it would have made no difference if they had been of the very highest merit, seeing that he had no eyes or ears or anything but the aching, sickening expectation of the moment when the orchestra would strike up the familiar air and the curtain would rise on the rustic scene, and she would come on with that little, startled, shy look that all the recalls and applause and the bouquets thrown could not banish — mercifully could not banish from the sweet, flower-like face.

You would hardly have supposed that it was a duet, to judge from Tom Bannister's feelings, and that there was another girl standing at Susie's side who, to the casual observer, looked every bit as young and innocent and sweet as Susie, and who sang as prettily. Nor would you have realized that there were hundreds of other listeners besides the dark-faced, close-shaven young fellow who always sat in the same position, and who, when the Sisters Primrose began to sing, leaned forward with his hands on his knees and his lips a little parted and his eyes fixed, and, directly the last note of the song was sung and the applause had died away, got up and made his way out, with very little consideration for the feelings of his neighbors, amongst whom his broad shoulders cleared the way with more speed than politeness.

"My good sir!" expostulated one of these elbowed or trodden-on neighbors, "can't you mind where you're going?"

But that was just what Tom Bannister could not

do, nor many another young fellow in the intoxication of first love.

Did Susie Primrose really sing her song straight across the hall into Tom Bannister's heart, as he felt she did? I think there was a sort of fascination in his rapt gaze; though I am afraid there were half a dozen other admiring youths, each of whom flattered himself that a look or a blush or a little shy courtesy was meant specially for him. But Tom was a little bit noticeable from his height and his good looks and a certain manly air of being somebody, which country gentlemen, who dwell among their own people, acquire.

Certain it is that Susie Primrose realized him definitely the second time he was there. He always maintained that the electric spark of love had flashed from his eyes to hers that very first evening, though perhaps she had not been conscious of it. But after that second time she tried to draw May's (her real name was Mary Anne) attention to this one among the audience, and Polly laughed and said it was like looking for a needle in a bottle of hay — which, perhaps, proved that Tom's theory of the electric spark was right, for it had clearly not reached May Primrose.

And after that Susie looked out for him, and felt a little touch of disappointment when he was not there; and, when several days elapsed without seeing him, began to wonder if he were ever coming again, not knowing what his presence at the Caledon cost in the matter of ingenious excuses to account for his frequent visits to London.

But it was not likely that Tom Bannister would long remain satisfied with such a very distant exchange of glances ; and yet for some time there seemed no way of approaching nearer, for inquiries at the stage-door were entirely unavailing, and the surly, cross-grained porter declined to give any information whatever about any of the *artistes*, and was not to be softened or conciliated by Tom's half-crowns.

As to waiting about at the stage entrance for the departure of the two girls, or tossing a note into the brougham that was in waiting for them every night at eleven, he was sickened of this by seeing others attempting the same devices, which struck him as caddish and despicable and deserving of a good kicking ; and he was heartily of opinion that it served the offender jolly well right when a dainty little envelope with, he fancied, a coronet on it, that had been deftly dropped into the carriage by an ineffable creature in evening dress, was tossed out into the mud as the brougham drove off.

After this Tom could not consistently resort to these same despicable artifices, and as he could not bring himself to confide in any one, things seemed to have come to a dead-lock ; and if it had not been for an accident, that first love of Tom's might have gone no further and this story never been written, or written very differently.

The accident was a very ordinary commonplace one, and many another young man would have gone on his way and thought an altercation between a cab-driver and his fare no concern of his, especially when

the fare was an old woman of unattractive appearance, and apparently well able to hold her own in the discussion. However, there was a spice of chivalry in Tom Bannister—a feeling which is becoming rarer every year, so that perhaps in the not far distant future it may be necessary to put a note when authors have occasion to use the word, to explain the meaning of this medieval absurdity, now obsolete. It is evident to the meanest capacity that chivalry is not consistent with bicycles and rational dress. However, the time of which I write was before the mighty revolution (a natural result, by the way, to be expected from a wheel) produced by bicycles, and the feeble forerunners of the great movement and their riders were slightly spoken of at Oxford as "cads on castors."

Anyhow, Tom had enough chivalry to stop and inquire if he could be of any assistance, and his offer being gratefully accepted, he made short work of the cabman, and parted from this distressed damsel with gray hair and rather a red nose—whose knight he had been—with a smile and a lift of the hat, and a disclaimer of the thanks she gave him, and he thought no more of it. But the old lady did; and as she was the guardian of the two pretty little singers, that small act of courtesy on Tom's part brought a reward he did not in the least anticipate.

And here again another accident favored him, for it was only a few days after this, and the very next time he came to London, that he met the old lady again, who recognized him at once with radiant

smiles ; and as their way lay together, he walked by her side till they reached the Caledon, where, to his surprise, she disappeared through that inaccessible stage-door as an habitué of the place.

And while he lingered, pondering on this curious coincidence, she came out again, accompanied by the two girls, who had been attending a rehearsal, and with a wonderful and unaccountable relaxation of her usual Cerberus-like treatment of the wolves surrounding these two innocent lambs committed to her care, introduced Tom to her charges.

Well, this was how Tom and Susie met, and after that all went easily and happily, and Tom lived in paradise — a fool's paradise, no doubt ; but if folly can turn this matter-of-fact, every-day life into such an exquisite, intoxicating dream, then, for pity's sake, let us all become fools as quickly as we can.

And the glamour Tom's love cast over Susie put entirely out of sight any want of education, any slight lack of refinement, any failure to understand and sympathize with some of his innate feelings and prejudices. But such honest, passionate love as Tom's, honestly and passionately returned as it was by Susie, has power to supply as well as to conceal defects in the loved one ; and in her constant intercourse with Tom, little Susie Primrose was gaining education, refinement, power to understand — altogether growing nearer to the ideal he had in his heart when he looked at her photograph and said, " Yes, that is Susie."

It did not occur to his mind that there could be any objection to his marrying her. In paradise there

were no heavy thunder-clouds and drenching storms of rain to be dreaded and provided against, but a mist came up and watered the ground. So the dwellers in love's paradise take small heed of threatening signs and weather forecasts, and go on in blissful unconsciousness till the storm bursts above their heads and they are obliged to realize that their garden is not planted eastward in Eden, but is in the very midst of matter-of-fact, ordinary life, with all its briars and thorns — where bread is only to be eaten in the sweat of their brows, where ways and means have to be thought of, and parents and guardians have a word to say on such matters.

The squire's letter was the first revelation to Tom that there was any opposition to be expected, and the squire's visit made it plain that the opposition was to be of a serious nature. But Tom did not even then realize that he was cutting himself off entirely from his father and the old home, and from what by the side of such a loss was comparatively insignificant, his inheritance.

The old man would come round. Things would come right. And he pictured to himself taking little Susie home, and seeing her win her way to all their hearts, as she could not fail to do when once they had seen her.

It never occurred to him that the coming round might be on his side, or thought for a moment of being deterred by what his action would cost him, or of letting Susie have any suspicion of the consequences that would ensue from their marriage.

So the letter of the family solicitor, written at the squire's request, putting the business in plain legal terms, setting forth the details of the inheritance that would come to him on his father's death if no alteration were made in the squire's present disposition of his property—which, however, a few words might entirely revoke—produced no effect whatever on Tom, or, if anything, made him more resolved to go his own way. And the kindly words of advice with which the letter closed, as from an old friend who had known Tom from childhood, were equally thrown away, though he wrote to thank the lawyer very warmly.

The letter informed him that there was a sum of money, to the interest of which, one hundred and fifty pounds a year, he was entitled under an uncle's will, and that this amount would be paid every year into a London bank for his use.

To Susie, one hundred and fifty pounds a year would have seemed untold riches; and though Tom knew better, he had the undefined feeling of one who has never had to pay his own bills, that one hundred and fifty pounds would go a good way for two people, who, like him and Susie, had simple tastes, and did not care for any society except each other's. At any rate it would be ample for the honeymoon; and after that, a voice, peremptorily silenced but insistent, whispered in his ear, the reconciliation would come, when, having got his own way, he would be ready to eat humble-pie to any amount, and make it up in every way to the good old pater.

He would have denied indignantly any reckoning of this sort, and would have demonstrated how easy it would be to supplement his income by literature, having written two or three clever little sketches of undergraduate life, which had been accepted by a magazine to the great pride and gratification of certain folks at Donnington.

But the honeymoon passed away, and I am bound to confess that in the little Breton villages where they passed that exquisitely sweet, idyllic summer, they lived wonderfully economically. But the summer had passed, and there was winter to be faced on a very small balance at the bank. And the pretty Breton villages did not look so attractive under heavy rain and creeping mist, with muddy roads along which the searching wind whirled the leaves from the gaunt rows of poplars that every day grew more bare and wintry.

Susie was out of health and out of spirits, and no longer laughed at little *contre-temps* or made the best of everything or treated life as a merry picnic, all the happier for not being quite conventional and cut and dried.

And Tom was very tender over her, and patient with small caprices and childish fretfulness ; for they were looking forward to a young life that would, if possible, draw them closer together, of whose coming they talked in low voices in the twilight with their cheeks pressed close together.

And then they went back to London, and Tom found it was a very different thing getting literary

employment to supply direful necessities of bread and butter, and getting it for the light amusement of opulent leisure.

Editors treated this shabby, eager-eyed young fellow, who was so anxious to conciliate and modest in his estimate of suitable remuneration, very differently to the easy-going, nonchalant undergraduate, with his innocent swagger and good opinion of himself, and take-it-or-leave-it way of presenting his contributions. But after a good many disappointments, and pocketing more snubs than young Tom Bannister at St. Faith's would have thought himself capable of stowing away so quietly, he got some literary work not of a particularly congenial kind, but still regular and fairly well paid.

And in the spring, Boy came, and from the very first was such an alleviation as to make up for much that otherwise might have been well-nigh intolerable.

Tom was almost tempted in those first proud hours of fatherhood, when Boy was a little dusky-looking object with a wise, old face, wrapped up in flannel, to write straight off to Donnington, so absolutely necessary did it seem that his mother should come and see her grandson, and indorse Tom's unprejudiced opinion that there never had been such a wonderful baby before.

I wish he had followed that first impulse, for the grandmotherly eyes that read the announcement in the papers overflowed at the sight, and the motherly heart yearned with such a longing for her boy — who

not so very long ago had been a baby himself in her arms — that a letter from Tom would have fetched her right away to Corsham Street, whatever any one might have said to the contrary ; and the old squire might not have been altogether displeased at being for once thwarted and set at defiance by his usually mild and gently acquiescent spouse.

But a newspaper advertisement has not the same constraining power as merely a couple of lines of even such a scrawl as Tom Bannister's, so only a few drops on the first column of the *Times* and a sore heart were the results.

CHAPTER IV

A MEETING

Should auld acquaintance be forgot,
And never brought to min' ? — BURNS.

AFTER this long retrospect I must ask the reader to follow Susie Bannister out into the foggy streets, where, however, the fog had lifted a little and hung sullenly overhead, ready at a moment's notice to drop again and produce all the hopeless confusion and danger and perplexity that only a fog can.

A sort of greasy dampness pervaded everything, and loose pieces of soot floated about in the air, making apparently of *malice prepense*, for people's faces as favorable resting-places. The shop windows were steamy and thick, which somewhat obscured the view; but Susie was not to be discouraged, for after a whole day spent in gazing out on the deadly monotony of Corsham Street, even intermittent glimpses of costumes and hats, jewelry and photographs are enchanting.

Oxford Street was thronged with traffic (both in the roadway and on the pavement), mostly pouring westward, as the afternoon was advanced by this time, and the city was beginning to pour itself out into the suburbs. I am afraid there are but few of us who view this stream out of the city in all directions—

of men old and young — with that simple feeling of gratitude expressed by an old woman in the East End who witnessed the arrival of a morning train at London Bridge, and who was affected almost to tears by the goodness of God Almighty "who had pervised sitiuations for all these genelmen."

The omnibus drivers and conductors were unusually full of chaff, having no doubt to keep their wits on the alert in a fog, and the hansom drivers were not far behind them in ready repartee ; and even the old growlers jogging along could give in gruff reply as good as they took.

Susie, as she stood looking in at the shop windows, was amused by the snatches of chaff that met her ears. After the quiet of the room in Corsham Street, with Tom's pen scratch, scratching on the paper, it was refreshing to hear some voices ; and if these were a bit rough, they were for the most part jolly and good-natured.

The shops, too, were beginning to have the Christmas brightness. Though it was very doubtful whether Tom would be able to afford her a Christmas present, it was an amusement to Susie to think what she would choose if he could ; and she was mother enough, too, to spend a considerable time before a toyshop selecting presents for Boy.

It was while she was seriously weighing the advantages of a drum resplendent in scarlet and gold, and a big dappled gray horse with flowing mane and tail and distended nostrils, that some one passing looked curiously — and no wonder ! — at this girl absorbed

in a toyshop window on such a foggy evening, when no one who could help it would choose to be out of doors.

Then followed an exclamation of surprise. The passer-by stopped in her purposeful walk, and swung round and caught Susie by the arm.

"Well, to be sure!" she said, "if it is n't Susie!"

To which Susie replied, "Why, Polly! whoever would have thought of seeing you?"

The two girls—not sisters, as I have already explained, but cousins—had been considered wonderfully alike, though Tom had never thought them so. Indeed, some of their admirers at the Caledon used to maintain that they could not tell them apart. But now, as they stood looking at one another in the light of the toyshop window, I do not think any one would have observed even a resemblance between them; they had both of them altered since the time that they had stood side by side on the Caledon stage by the rustic gate, with the village scene behind, and sung the simple little song that the world of London had long since forgotten.

Polly (or May, as the bills called her) had certainly, in Susie's eyes, much improved. She was very well dressed to begin with, and that went a long way with Susie, as it does with most women—and, for the matter of that, with men too. Her well-cut jacket was handsomely trimmed with fur, and her pretty little jaunty hat showed her hair done in the latest style; and the hands she drew out of her sable muff to seize Susie's arm were well gloved. Her eyes

were a little bit touched up. Susie had been long enough at the music-hall to notice when this was the case ; but it was very judiciously done. Polly's eyes had always been one of her weak points, where Susie had the advantage and happily did not require any such little artifices to add to her natural charms ; Tom had a great objection to anything of the sort, and would not tolerate the most distant approach to them.

Tom's opinion had so decidedly predominated Susie's — if Susie ever had anything worthy to be called opinions of her own — that now as she scanned her old friend and noted the changes in her, she was mainly comparing her with Tom's standard, and considering what he would think of her. Beyond that very becoming touch under the eyelashes, Susie thought he would have approved of her.

On the other hand, Polly did not think Susie by any means improved, and was looking her over with a kindly but very disparaging eye, noticing the shabbiness of her dress, and the want of fit in her jacket, and a hole in one of her gloves. Susie's young face was a little bit pale and heavy-eyed, too, from the fog and the weariness of a dull day ; and the pretty hair was not arranged to the advantage that Polly's less naturally ornamental locks displayed.

"Why, you dear little soul ! " she went on, with an affectionate cordiality that warmed Susie's heart even while she felt that Tom would have thought the voice too loud, and would not have liked the way several passers-by stared round at them in con-

sequence, and the coolness with which Polly received their curious glances. "This is luck to meet you like this ! I've thought of you times out of mind, and wondered what had become of you ; but I've always looked out for you in a carriage and pair at least, and never dreamed of meeting you just tramping the pavement like poor me. And all in the fog, too ! and quite by yourself ! Well, to be sure ! wonders will never cease ! But come right away and let's have a cup of tea and a good crack. There's an ABC shop just along farther, and if you don't mind standing swallowing all the fog, I do," Polly ended with a little cough, drawing her fur more snugly round her throat. "It's all very well for girls who have husbands to work for them, but I tell you I'm like little Tom Tucker who sang for his supper ; and fog always makes me terribly croaky."

"I'm afraid I've come out without my purse," Susie stammered, feeling in the pocket of her dress for the purse which she knew quite well she had left at home, and which she also remembered had nothing in it.

"Oh, I'll stand treat," Polly said. "Come along !"

And soon the two girls were sitting at a little table with cups of steaming coffee in front of them, and a plate of crumpets — very comforting and warming to Susie's pinched little body, though she tried her best to conceal the satisfaction they caused her, for fear Polly should suspect what a very unusual thing even such very simple indulgences had become in these days.

All the same, Polly saw well enough through Susie's little artifices, and the indifference about taking the last buttery morsel, and faint deprecation of another relay of crumpets being ordered, and polite consent to a second cup of coffee just to keep Polly company if she wanted another.

She was thinking all the time that if this was what marrying a gentleman meant, she herself was well out of it; though she had often envied Susie when life was stormy, and stage managers difficult and audiences unappreciative. She had been rattling on, telling of her life since that day, four years ago, when they had parted at the door of the little dull church in Marylebone, and Susie had driven away in a hansom with her good-looking, bright-faced boy of a husband. Polly had looked after them with misty eyes, feeling she was left in the lurch and that it was hard lines that Susie should have all the good things of this world, and be a lady, and never have to bother about anything; while she was left behind to get on as best she could, exposed to the ill-temper of the manager at the Caledon, who was naturally very wroth at the interference with one of his most telling turns, and who was disposed to visit on poor, innocent Polly his indignation at Susie's desertion.

"I did have a bad time of it, Susie!" Polly said, recalling those days. "I'd half a mind to go back to Crowlink, and take to the washing again. I really did! and I think I should if it had not been for Mrs. Brown. She was a good old soul, and before she died — Why, did n't you know she was gone,

poor old dear? Yes, to be sure! She was ailing, you remember, before you went; and she got a cold that spring, and never seemed to get the better of it. She often talked of you, Susie, and before she died she said to me, 'Polly,' she said — I'd been nursing her, you know, and done all I knew for her — 'Polly, you've been a good girl to me, and God will reward you; and give Susie my love, and tell her I've thought a deal of her.'"

There were tears in the eyes that were so cleverly touched up, though the next minute the drops were winked away and an admiring glance acknowledged from a man at the next table.

"But I got an engagement for the Drury Lane Pantomime, and made quite a success. I dare say you saw in the papers about my little Boopiep? And then the old Caledon wanted to get me on again; but I knew a trick worth two of that, and I got an engagement in the provinces in burlesque, and did n't do badly; and was in the pantomime again next year, and since then I've had a regular engagement at the Memnon. Just now there's a talk of a touring company going to America some time after Christmas, and they want me to go. I've two minds about it, for I've not been over and above well; and I don't believe London suits me. You recollect my chest was always a bit creaky; and I get such shocking colds; and there's no keeping out of draughts behind the scenes. It might do me no end of good; and yet I don't much like going all that way without some one I know. Oh! the rest of the company's

well enough, but they're not like one's own belongings. Now, if you were going, Susie, I'd go like a shot. Dear, what fun we'd have ! I should n't mind where I went if you were going too ; it was a pity you gave it up, for you were always a lot better at it than me. Old Bristow at the Caledon was mad at losing you, I can tell you ! Your voice was better than mine, and some people thought you were the prettiest ; but that was just a matter of taste, so you needn't be conceited — and perhaps the difference is the other way now. But, dear me ! why ever don't you do your hair differently ? No one would think you had such a heap of it. I declare my fingers are regularly itching to get at your head ! I'd turn you out so stylish you would n't know yourself ! And wherever did you get that jacket ? There's no more fit in it than a sack ; it wants taking up on the shoulder, and — But, bless my heart ! here have I been running on, and you've hardly told me a word of what you've been about. Where are you living ? "

And then Susie had to confess to Corsham Street, writhing inwardly at the " Oh — h — h ! " with which Polly received the information, as if she were settling down audibly from her exalted ideas of Susie's prosperity to a very greatly reduced estimation.

" Well, I was beginning to think that jacket did not look much like a carriage and pair, though I will say you see uncommonly badly dressed women in all sort of smart turn-outs, with coachman and footman and all the rest of it. But you don't mean to say that Mr. Bannister was a swindle,

and not nearly such a big swell as he made himself out?"

But in spite of the emollient effects of crumpets and hot coffee, and the pleasure of meeting an old friend, Susie blazed up at this, and was putting on her shabby gloves and preparing to go off into the fog in high dudgeon, if Polly had not pulled her back and told her not to be such a ridiculous little goose, as, of course, she meant nothing against that precious husband of hers; and how was she to know anything about him unless Susie would tell her? And she must look alive, too, for she (Polly) must be off at six, and it was a quarter to, now.

"Well, you see," Susie said, only partially mollified, and speaking a little stiffly and in a dignified manner that tickled Polly vastly as coming from little Susie. "Well, you see, my husband is not on terms with his family."

"I knew they didn't like the marriage. But have n't they come round all this time?"

Susie shook her head. "You see, they are a very high family, and awfully proud and all that; and Tom's just the same, and he won't hold out a little finger till they make some sort of opening first."

"Won't he now?" said Polly, entirely unable to understand such a feeling, and especially when it interfered with bread and butter. "But I suppose they are safe to come round some day, though I must say they seem a precious long time about it?"

"Oh, yes, I suppose so," Susie said. "If they won't for our sake, they're bound to for Boy's."

"Boy? Is that a baby? Why, you don't mean to say—you dear, blessed little soul, you ridiculous baby yourself!—that you've a real live baby of your own?"

The voice was loud enough to attract the notice of several people at the neighboring tables, and of one or more of the waitresses threading their way among them; but I think Tom could hardly have failed to appreciate the honest, affectionate sincerity of Polly's delight at this first mention of Susie's baby.

"Why, he's hardly to be called a baby now," Susie said, with the maternal pride brightening in her eyes and glowing in her cheeks. "He's getting quite a big boy; he'll be three next March. And he is a bonny boy; and such a curly head! I often used to think of you, Polly, and how you'd have loved to have the kissing of him. When he was small and I was giving him his bath, I should just like you to have seen him. He was a perfect picture! You'd have half eaten him up, that you would!—with his straight back and his lovely, dimpled, round limbs as firm and mottled"— And so on, with details which we can spare the reader, but to which Polly listened open-mouthed, and beamed out of her touched-up eyes with the sincerest interest.

"Why, I declare it's six! I must fly. I have n't said half or a quarter I want to—but I shall come to Corsham Street. What number is it? I must come and see that precious baby of yours before I'm

many days older. Does his father care for him at all?"

"Care for him? He just worships him! I'm almost jealous, I can tell you, of the fuss he makes over him."

And meanwhile Polly was paying for their tea out of a purse that looked to Susie pleasantly plump and well furnished, and then the two girls parted — Polly hailing a hansom and disappearing in the fog, waving her hand and nodding till she was out of sight, and Susie making her way as best she could towards Corsham Street.

CHAPTER V

BOY'S ADVENTURE

He 's all my exercise, my mirth, my matter;
Now my sworn friend, and then my enemy;
My parasite, my soldier, statesman, all. —SHAKESPEARE.

M EANWHILE Tom had finished off that London letter, not altogether to his own satisfaction ; but dissatisfaction is, I am told, generally the case in the soul of an artist on the completion of a work. But, anyhow, it was done, and Tom pushed back his chair and gave himself a mighty stretch that seriously threatened the globes of the gas chandelier. But there was no time to be lost if the parcel was to go by the country post, so he kicked off his slippers into the corner of the room and began burrowing under the sofa for his boots, and was half-way into them, and anathematizing boot-laces — which always snap if you happen to be in a special hurry — when sounds of stirring and a little whimpering from the other side of the table reminded him of Boy's presence, and of his own responsibility in regard to him in his mother's absence.

“ Hullo there ! ” he said. “ All right ! Daddy 's coming in a brace of shakes.”

“ He 'll be all right while I just step round to the

post. I sha'n't be two minutes; and he's only half awake yet."

But Boy was waking with a decidedly tea-time feeling, which does not tend to placidity but induces a lonesome, desolate feeling in the stoutest baby breast; and though Tom hardened his heart and got well out into the passage and had his hand on the latch, he could not bring himself to ignore a bitter little cry that followed him out, and was fain to come back to reassure a very Peter-grievous little person stretching out fat arms to be taken up — which fat arms were likewise irresistible, even though the aggressively ticking American clock on the mantelpiece beat into his brain that post-time was very near at hand.

Tom made a hasty step towards the head of the kitchen stairs; but Boy had learned by experience that though he was lord of all he surveyed upstairs he occupied a very subordinate position down in the kitchen, where another potentate reigned supreme, and he began at once to protest against being consigned to Mrs. Martin's care — a repugnance with which his father sympathized so heartily that he weakly allowed himself to be dissuaded by the clinging of fat arms round his neck and drumming of small heels against his side and the rubbing of a coaxing cheek against his.

"But what on earth am I to do with you, Boy?" said this perplexed young father, with the prospects of the family bread and butter growing more shady with every tick of the American clock. "Well, bother

it all ! I shall have to take you along with me. Oh, I say, here's a pretty business!" Tom went on, grumbling half to himself, half to Boy, as he rummaged in drawers and boxes for a certain little warm coat which was nowhere to be found. "Taking a brat like you out into the fog ! I wonder what sensible mothers and nurses would say to such a thing? Oh, it's all very well to laugh !" For Boy, having got what he wanted, and sitting in the middle of the bed awaiting this new and exciting toilet, was rippling over with delighted little chucklings of amusement at seeing his father frantically opening and shutting drawers and making a haycock of their contents, a performance which Boy evidently regarded as done solely for his entertainment.

When Boy's toilet was finally completed for what he himself would have described as "going tat-ta," the result was as follows — knitted woollen gaiters put on upside down ; only one shoe — the other was, I think, in the waste-paper basket in the next room ; a jacket of Susie's, which effectually covered up a very grubby pinafore, and the sleeves of which were of such ample length as to save any necessity for gloves — the large hiatus at the neck was obviated by the woollen antimacassar off the end of the horse-hair sofa, an object which Tom had often before anathematized for its ugliness and futility, but which now answered a very practical purpose ; and the whole was crowned by an old cloth cap of Tom's pulled down well over the ears.

Well, anyhow, Boy was clothed very much to his



Off they went out into the fog.

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own satisfaction, and just in time at a smart run to reach the post-office by six; and off they went out into the fog and along the sticky pavement, with Boy's arm tight round his father's neck, and his soft, warm breath tickling that father's ear.

It was not till after the packet was safely in the box and Tom getting back his breath after the run — out of training, Tom, my boy, to get winded by such a short spurt! — having set down Boy for that purpose on the desk where telegrams are indited, that Tom had time to contemplate the odd little bundle he had made of his son and heir, the only visible portion of whom was one bright eye and a little round button of a nose emerging from the dingy green and red antimacassar under the penthouse of Tom's cap.

And then Tom burst out into one of his old great hearty laughs that were so well known at St. Faith's and Donnington, but that were not so frequent at Corsham Street, and stifled chucklings of a shriller description from the bundle on the telegram desk joined in, till the wearied, harassed young ladies behind the counter looked round suspiciously, darkly surmising that such mirth on a foggy evening must be due to good spirits of another sort than mere gayety of heart.

But even one of these grim-faced damsels relaxed into something akin to a smile when Boy's face emerged from the antimacassar radiant and beaming, and tumbled curls were revealed by the cap dropping off.

Well, after all, there are compensations for a Bo-

hemian life ! If Tom had been living at Donnington, Boy would have spent half his time shut away in nurseries with a regiment of valuable and dictatorial nurses to keep his unworthy parent at arm's length ; if the sun of prosperity had always shone on Tom, he might never have known the pleasant sensation of a child's arm clinging round his neck in that entire trust and familiarity. What do young fathers of the upper classes know of their baby children ? Why, nothing at all. "And a good thing, too !" Tom himself would have added, in old days, when babies were just "queer little beggars," only tolerated for the sake of some pretty young mother anxious to display her offspring. The mothers have a better chance of enjoying the babies, but even they are too often nurse-ridden, and merely visitors on sufferance in their own nurseries.

I wonder what Tom's former friends at St. Faith's would have said if they could have seen him that evening — he who used to be the most dapper and well turned out of the lot, and was now shabby and unshaven, and with his collar a thing to shudder at from the close contact of the clinging arm ? But if all of them had been there to see and wonder, or pity or deride, I think Tom would still have laughed that jolly big laugh of amusement and stretched out his arms to Boy with the same "Come on, old scarecrow ; we must be off !" and have defied their criticism and returned their pity with interest, and laughed at their dreary conventionality and the dull routine of society life.

Now it would have been better for all concerned if Tom had taken Boy straight away home, as he quite intended to do. Not so much on account of the fog, though the fatigued young lady at the post-office who had been betrayed into a smile volunteered a remark that it was not weather to bring a child out in — which was too self-evident a fact to be worth answering. So do not let the reader forebode for a moment evil to Boy ensuing — bronchitis, or what Mrs. Martin called "pomonia." Boy had that aggravating peculiarity of never giving any one the opportunity of saying "I told you so!" as he had proved already that afternoon by virtuous behavior when the opposite had been prophesied. His digestion had proved itself worthy of an ostrich under highly injudicious feeding ; and now the fog seemed only to make him rosier, and more bright eyed and gurgling with laughter. So it was not on that account that I regret Tom's deviation from the direct way home into that confectioner's, past which the path of duty led him ; nor was it on account of Boy's digestion, which, as I have said, was impeccable ; nor the squandering of pence on jam-tarts, though Tom could ill afford such extravagance ; nor was it, except indirectly, on account of smears of jam and barley-sugar on that jacket of Susie's which provided such an all-encompassing *surtout* for Boy, though it was her best, and reserved for high days and holidays — but it was that, owing to this trifling delay, Susie reached Corsham Street first.

She found the fire out, and the room — well, in

the state a room would be where a man has been writing all day, and gone out in a hurry ; and the bedroom was in a still more desperate condition, with drawers half out and boxes open and a candle left guttering in the draught from the window, forming fantastic stalagmites on the candlestick.

It is not often that one can mark the very first pin-prick of the little rift within the lute ; but I think in this case it may be pretty accurately traced to that last curly, yellow stick of barley-sugar grasped in Boy's hand, and imparting its stickiness liberally to the aforesaid jacket and his father's coat sleeve.

Susie had come home through the foggy streets pleased and elated by her meeting with Polly, and anxious to tell Tom all about it, and a little bit compunctionous at having enjoyed her coffee and crumpets so thoroughly without Tom or Boy sharing in the feast ; and Polly's delight and interest in the idea of Susie's baby had taken away the sting of her friend's superior dress and lordly disregard of expense in the matter of payments. With Susie, too, the possession of Boy set her on a pedestal that overtopped all the prosperity of other people.

"I'll make them some toast for tea," Susie said to herself as she turned the corner into Corsham Street. "Poor old Tom ! I was a bit cross to him this afternoon ; but we'll have a pleasant, warm evening, and I'll tell him all about Polly."

And then to find the room like that ! Toast indeed ! Tom knew how disagreeable Mrs. Martin was when the fire went out, and Mary Jane had to

bring up sticks and light it again. There was always a feeling on the subject of coals with Mrs. Martin, and a tendency to sniff and take offence at any demur about the number of scuttles consumed during the week, which were reckoned up in decidedly round numbers in the weekly bill; and she always set it down to mean economy, and an intent to defraud in the matter of fire-wood, when the fire was allowed to go out.

Polly, most likely, had a roaring fire ready for her whenever she came in cold and tired — though she could never be cold with those lovely furs, or tired when she could take a hansom whenever she pleased.

And thinking of Polly's furs reminded her of the way her friend's jacket was braided, a way which, she thought, might be introduced with advantage into the trimming of her best jacket. And this led to the exasperating discovery that the said jacket was gone, and that Boy's thick coat had fallen right on the top of her Sunday hat, to the serious damage of its feathers.

I really think that Susie had some excuse for the irritation of her feelings.

And just then Tom and Boy came in.

Reader, do you know what it is to sit up for people who have gone to a ball or the theatre? Just when you are sleepy and cross, with that feeling of injured virtue which is inseparable from sitting at home awaiting the return of gay revellers — though you would not really have changed places with them for worlds, and are perfectly comfortable with your

book and your pipe (if you are of the masculine gender), and are not actually being kept up beyond your ordinary bed-time — just then the party returns, cheerful and lively and full of jokes of which you know nothing, and interrupting their perfunctory description to you of who was there and what they had seen by comparing notes among themselves on what had happened, and by allusions which appear to you very pointless but provoke exquisite amusement in them.

Well, such was a little bit the effect of Tom and Boy's return — allowing for Boy not being yet very articulate, and having to make a few words do duty to express many ideas ; and it was the more annoying, as Susie expected to be the one returning to recount her adventures and cheer up the dulness of those at home.

Dulness? Not a bit of it! Boy was wild with delight and excitement, and had so much to say that even if by this time she had been inclined to describe her doings, she could hardly have edged in a word, so continuous were the repetition of every incident of that tremendous adventure, by the side of which those of Sindbad the Sailor or Jack the Giantkiller failed to stir the blood !

That evening, and for days afterwards, Boy was never tired of fighting his battles over again — making up packets out of the waste-paper basket that required immediate posting, dressing his small person up in whatever garments came to hand (never forgetting the antimacassar), and then racing round

the room as fast as short legs could go, and ending in a burst of laughter at the armchair.

They had been stamping the letters at the post-office when he was there, and imitating this proceeding with a paper-weight afforded Boy continual amusement, though the process was rather irritating after ten minutes or so to others in the room.

The second scene in the drama, when the curtain rose on the fairyland of a confectioner's shop, had to be enacted under supervision, as exuberant imagination would sometimes lead to the actual consumption of penholders and bits of sealing-wax that were make-believes for tarts and barley-sugar.

Tom was as much amused as Boy, quite in his old boyish spirits, and this gave another sting to the jealous little heart that liked to think that all the sunshine came to Tom through her; though she did not take much pains to keep the sky clear of clouds, as had been demonstrated that afternoon.

Tom was too busy at first lighting the fire, much hindered by officious help from Boy, to notice that Susie was a little bit glum, and, when he did, he set it down to the damage to the best jacket, which he sincerely deplored. He did not guess that the dissatisfaction with which she viewed that hitherto cherished garment was not so much the stickiness caused by Boy's visit to the confectioner's as comparison with a well-cut, natty little jacket trimmed with fur, which Susie's admiring eyes had seen vanish into a hansom an hour or two ago.

So Susie said nothing to Tom of her meeting with Polly.

CHAPTER VI

A PLAN

When the rain raineth and the goose winketh,
Little wotteth the gosling what the goose thinketh.

THERE had always been an odd sort of sympathy between Tom and Boy—not all on one side, even though Boy was such a baby. I do not think sympathy can be all on one side. You can pour out pity and kindness and—yes, I suppose—love on unresponsive objects; but sympathy demands some answering expression, if it is only the wag of a tail, or a purr.

Boy was very fond of his mother, and she of him; and they would play together like two children, and quarrel and make it up again. He would go to her when he was hurt and some one was needed to kiss the place and make it well, or when he was sleepy and wanted to be cuddled up in warm arms; but when he hurt himself, and stiffened his under-lip and was a man and did not cry, he looked at his father, who understood and nodded back, whereas his mother would have thought he was not really hurt at all. So when he sacrificed a much idolized wooden horse with three legs to send down to George Augustus in the kitchen, who was crying, Tom patted the curly head approvingly, while Susie only commented on chil-

dren's fickleness and on how soon they got tired of their playthings.

So, on the other hand, when Tom had one of his very rare fits of the blues — a frame of mind in which Susie had found by experience he was best left to himself, and so kept out of the way, and did her utmost to keep Boy, too — the child was not to be deterred, but made his way in his little nightshirt, and barefooted to the side of the gloomy, silent figure in the armchair, with hands dug deep into pockets and eyes fixed on the dull, ashy grate ; and he climbed up the stiff, outstretched legs that gave no encouragement to the bold explorer by bending at the knee to afford a *locus standi*.

And then before the unresponsive face, and much too near for the gloomy eyes to see properly, Boy held up a cherished possession which he had found of great comfort in times of affliction — a monkey on a pole, with a red jacket and blue trousers ; and when Susie, in dismay at the discovery of an empty crib, hurried after the fugitive, she found father and son entirely engrossed in rectifying some hitch in the simple machinery that sent the monkey head-foremost over the stick. That magic toy, or something else, appeared to have cleared away the clouds from Tom's face, and they had quite a cheerful evening ; and Boy was allowed to sit up to supper, which meant going fast asleep in his father's arms.

But after that foggy evening the freemasonry between the two seemed to have become more complete ; and a plan that had crossed Tom's mind already once

or twice, but had been dismissed as entirely impracticable, began to take more definite shape.

About four miles from Donnington was a farm called Birches Farm, a snug little holding rented by a certain John Day, whose wife had been maid to Mrs. Bannister twenty years ago when Tom had been a small boy. It was a very favorite expedition with Tom and his sisters to ride over to Birches Farm and have tea with the farmer and his wife, feeling always sure of a hearty welcome, and thoroughly enjoying all the incidents of farm life—the great, cool dairy; the sweet-breathed cows coming in for milking; the troops of impudent, sleek little pigs, so vociferous for their supper; the “wiselike” yellow balls of ducklings, and their agitated, fussy hen mother; the sentimental, peevish hen turkeys, and the pompous, aldermanic turkey-cock, etc. But I need not describe to the reader all these details as Tom used to describe them to Boy, who only knew most of the objects mentioned in picture-books.

Tom had once spent a month at the farm when he was ten, and one of his sisters had scarlatina, so that he could not go home; but the delights then of ratting, bird-nesting, climbing trees, and riding the farm horses barebacked, were pleasures rather beyond Boy’s powers of comprehension at present, as was also the old farm garden, the fragrance of which came back to Tom’s nostrils many a time in London, where the best to be hoped is that the air should be free from any smell at all. The fragrance of that garden was as the smell of a field that the Lord hath

blessed — sweet-peas and lavender, mignonette and honeysuckle, rosemary and stocks, and great clove-pinks in such profusion and luxuriance as all the art and culture and knowledge of botanical names on the part of the Donnington gardener could not attain to.

The plan that had been indistinctly hovering in Tom's mind, and that took more tangible shape after that foggy evening, was to take Susie and Boy down to Birches Farm for a couple of days — binding over Mrs. Day and the farmer to secrecy, and not going anywhere likely to bring about awkward meetings.

To take Susie and Boy? Yes, that was the original idea ; but afterwards the order was reversed, and he thought of taking Boy and Susie. It would not be, of course, to initiate Boy into all those summer delights of young ducks and flowers and hayfields, but just beyond Birches Farm was the "Horse-shoes" Inn, a very favorite place for the fox-hounds to meet ; and the coverts round the farm were never known to be drawn blank, as Mrs. Day sometimes knew to her cost, such well-stocked coverts being ill neighbors to a poultry-yard.

Indeed, that gorse covert which had lured Tom's thoughts from his London letter was hard by Birches Farm, and there was more than one snug nook Tom wotted of where he and Boy — yes, and Susie too, if she had a mind to it — could stand and see the field go by without fear of recognition. Mrs. Day would be delighted to welcome them, Tom was sure. He had always been a prime favorite of hers from his earliest years, and a privileged guest at the farm ;

and though she had never had any children of her own — or, perhaps, all the more so — she would delight in Boy ; and a smile, unaccountable and rather irritating to Susie, would come into Tom's face, picturing in his mind what a young king Boy would be at the farm.

But if this scheme was ever to be carried out, the money must be found for it ; and it was no good saying anything to Susie about it till it was reasonably probable they could afford to go.

Poor little soul ! When once she had set her heart on anything she was so miserably disappointed if it did not come off, so Tom was afraid to share bright anticipations with her any more than he shared anxieties — which was a pity, as, in spite of what Longfellow says, it is not always well to live too exclusively in the living present, especially when that present is November and December in Corsham Street ; it would be a sadder world than it is without the bright possibilities of the future and the dear memories of the past. And this pet scheme of Tom's led to the practice of more strenuous economy than usual, which did not tend to make that gray and monotonous present in Corsham Street more attractive, especially when contrasted with glimpses of a more affluent, lively, amusing life such as Polly's. The approach of Christmas, too, with its prevailing atmosphere of jollity and liberality, made it all the harder to find that even their ordinary, very moderate expenditure must be curtailed.

Once she was mollified by the suspicion that Tom

was saving up to give her a present, but when she cast out feelers — as it would have been such a pity if he had chosen a fur she did not like — she found that it was nothing of the kind, and that he had not even noticed her need of a collarette.

One day when Tom came in, having been off to see some public function to be described in his London letter, he found a strong smell of scent pervading the room, and Boy sitting under the table in his best pinafore emptying a large box of chocolate with amazing rapidity.

Tom had a keen sense of smell, and very strong likes and dislikes in such matters ; and his afternoon had been irritating, and he was tired, so perhaps there was a little excuse for his conduct. For he used an inelegant word in describing the scent — which Polly specially prided herself on as being fashionable and refined — and proceeded to open the window as far as it would go.

Susie had slipped out of the room as soon as she had heard Tom's key in the latch, being anxious that he should not see her directly he came in ; but the sound of his exclamation and the opening window brought her back hastily on to the scene, forgetting the change in her hairdressing which Polly's skilful fingers had worked, and the necessity of breaking the operation to Tom gently.

“ Whatever is the matter ? ” she said, “ opening the window like that ? And Boy with a croupy little cough ! I 'm sure I put up with your pipe, morning, noon, and night ; and I don't see why you should

mind when for once in a way the room does not smell of tobacco ! ”

Tom pulled down the window with a shamefaced little laugh. He was ashamed of himself for his loss of temper, and he was ashamed of her retort. It is always in moments of anger that the want of good-breeding shows itself; there may be the most highly polished veneer outside that may pass muster as solid walnut in most circumstances, but once lose your temper and you are always liable to betray the pitch-pine underneath.

“ All right,” he said, “ only one of my fads ! A croupy cough — eh, Boy ? It’s more like a stomach-ache with all those chocolates. You must have been a good boy for mother to give you such a lot ! And what a smart box, too ! ”

Boy, in a voice rather thick with chocolate, was anxious to impart some information about a pretty lady ; but just then Tom’s eyes lighted on Susie’s hair, and not having yet quite recovered from the little squall that had ruffled the usually placid surface of his temper, the hasty words of adverse criticism jumped to the tip of his tongue before he could stop them.

“ Why, my dear child, whatever have you been doing to yourself? — making such an object of your poor little head ! Has Mary Jane been experimenting upon it ? Or,—” He was going to say, “ Has a hen been scratching there ? ” only happily he stopped short at the sight of the flush of vexation and mortification in his young wife’s pretty face.

Polly had been so admiring of the result of her own handiwork; and Susie, taking pleased little peeps at the back and side views with the help of a hand-glass, had been very gratified to observe that the effect was not at all unlike the ghastly wax head with an abnormally long neck in the hairdresser's window.

It was not a propitious introduction to what Susie had intended to tell him in as pleasant and attractive a form as possible, as she had a lurking suspicion that Tom might not be best pleased at this renewal of intercourse with her old friend.

There had never been any stipulation on the subject of Susie having nothing more to do with her own people, and Tom would have indignantly denied any wish to dictate to her in this matter, or to prevent her doing anything that duty or inclination might dictate. But in his heart he had often been glad that Susie had so few relations, and none of them very near akin, and that she appeared to have no wish to seek out any of them. Even Polly, for whom she really seemed to feel some affection, had dropped entirely out of ken after the exchange of one or two curiously stiff and rather laboriously written letters.

Tom used sometimes to wonder, when the homesickness made itself felt in his own heart, and the longing for the old folks at home and "the fragrance of the old paternal fields," whether there was any feeling of the same sort aching out of sight in his wife's little heart; and he would draw her to him



with an outburst of passionate tenderness, with the thought of how much they had given up for their love of one another. But he might have spared himself this additional impulse of affection, for Susie had no thought beyond the one love that surrounded her — as is the way of some women, and one man in a thousand, and most dogs. Susie had thought but little of Polly during their separation, except, as she had truly told Polly, when she had desired an appreciative spectator of Boy's beauties.

But all the same, Susie had been very much pleased at that meeting with Polly, which untoward circumstances had prevented her relating to Tom ; and the visit this afternoon had really been quite an event, relieving the monotony of life in Corsham Street, or perhaps making the monotony less endurable in contrast.

The very arrival had been exciting — the dash up to the door of the hansom, and the noisy pull up at the curb, and the doors thrown back, and Polly jumping out and laughing at some little joke of the cabman at she paid the fare. A little group of children and perambulators collected to see the arrival, such being by no means common in Corsham Street.

What a good thing Tom was out ! Polly's laugh and the gaping children would have annoyed him.

Susie would have liked to have straightened herself a bit, and to have put a clean pinafore on Boy ; but she forgot all about how she looked when Polly pushed aside the awestruck and gaping Mary Jane, and made her way in without ceremony, and after

a hearty kiss to Susie, simply flew at Boy with the most thorough and delightful admiration that mother's heart had ever been gratified with. So the state of his pinafore did not matter either.

Boy was a little bit serious and staring, not being used to such demonstrative homage or to so much laughter, or to any one so well dressed, and his dignity was a little injured at being spoken of and treated as a baby. Of course, Susie's attempts to show off his small accomplishments were utter failures — as such attempts always are with children worth their salt who are not little prigs. He was propitiated with a big box of chocolate, and retired with it under the table ; while the two girls drew up their chairs to the fire, recklessly heaped up with coals by Susie in honor of the occasion.

Happily it was too early to offer tea, for Susie was not at all sure how Mrs. Martin would consider the subject of afternoon tea at unwonted hours ; and Polly's announcement that she had run off directly she had swallowed her luncheon, saved the necessity of offering any other refreshment.

Polly was still full of the American touring project, which was now definitely settled, though not altogether to her satisfaction.

"It is really a comfort, Sue, to have some one to talk over things a bit with — some one outside, I mean, who has n't any motive for advising this or that. Oh yes ! You 'd hardly think all the little mean motives that come out in the best of them. I dare say I 'm as bad, and it can't be helped. In our

profession we must push our way, and if you don't, you must just go under — that's all ; and I expect it's the same all the world over. But I tell you what it is, Sue," and Polly sank her voice to a more confidential tone, though there was only Boy to hear her confidences, "I don't think I'd have agreed to go if I'd known Page Lewis was to be one of the company. Oh ! you know Page Lewis ; he acts under the name of Carson, and he's awfully good, I will say that, and he'll be just the making of the company if he goes. But I can't abide him ! He's just horrid. The other girls say I'm awfully prim and old-maidish, and that he don't mean anything, and it's just his way. And it's a bit of a compliment, too, his taking any notice of a girl ; and most of them would just jump at him if he held up his little finger. But I'm not that sort, you know, Sue—I never was ; though I will say," Polly said with a little toss of her chin, "that many girls might have had their heads turned with all the attention I've had in my time. But Mrs. Brown always said I was one of the steady sort that could be trusted. And I often think of her when I feel a bit larky ; she was a good old soul, and no mistake ! But oh ! Susie, I do wish you were coming ; I'd snap my fingers at Page Lewis and all the rest of them then. It's easy enough for two girls to face it out and get their own way, where one alone has a bad time of it. And you and me together could just keep ourselves to ourselves ; and if we chose to be slow and steady, why, we'd just be slow and steady, and let the others say what they please.

When I was telling the Signor — Contarini, you know ; he 's running the company — that I 'd met you the other day, he remembered you quite well, and he said : ' Is she likely to come back to the stage ? It was an uncommon pity she gave it up ; she had the making of quite a good *artiste*.' And I tell you that 's high praise from Contarini, for he knows what 's what."

" What did you say ? " asked Susie.

" Well, I said I did n't know but what you might some day, and that I was sure you 'd pick it up again as easy as anything, as you always had it in you from a child. He was quite taken with the idea of you, for he began about it again, and he said you were the — Well, I won't tell you what he said, so you need n't blush like that. And that reminds me ! I really must do your hair ; it gives me the fidgets to see it put up anyhow like that when you have such a heap of it."

So the girls adjourned to the next room, and Boy from the middle of the bed solemnly watched the process of hairdressing ; and it was then that he was adorned with his best pinafore, which had attracted his father's attention when he came in a few minutes after Polly's departure.

CHAPTER VII

A LOBSTER TEA

The small violence done
Rankles in him, and ruffles all his heart,
As the sharp wind that ruffles all day long
A little bitter pool about a stone
On the bare coast.—TENNYSON.

THE success of a story very much depends on the way it starts; the most amusing one falls flat in the telling if it is begun in a muddling, ineffective way. And I have often — have not you, reader? — closed a book because the first chapter was heavy and dull.

So the story of Susie's meeting with her old friend — which might have been quite an amusing little episode to describe to Tom — and her call, and the gossip about the touring company and the jealousies and heart-burnings attendant on it, which would certainly have entertained him, withered up into a few sulky words, with a note of defiance in them which was particularly irritating to Tom, because deep down in his heart he was not particularly delighted at this revival of old acquaintance, and would accordingly have done his very utmost to appear pleased and interested.

When people take up the cudgels at the outset,

it is very difficult to discuss a matter amicably with the best intentions. And so whatever Tom said, or did not say, was taken amiss. If he was silent, it was because he did not take the slightest interest ; if he asked anything, he was cross-questioning her, as if he could not trust his wife to do and say what was right. If he laughed, he was making fun of the poor girl, who was quite good enough for her, Susie ; and if he was grave, he was pulling a long face and making too much of Polly's nonsense. If he spoke of her as "Polly," he was sneering at her having such a common name — and it was not her fault that she was not Angela or Gwendolene (Tom's sisters, by the way, were Ann, Sophy, and Ruth, so could not be reckoned to have pretentious names) ; and when he called her Miss Wilmot it was stiff and horrid of him, and just done to show that he did not reckon Susie's relations to have anything to do with him.

Altogether Tom's path was unusually thorny, and the culminating point was reached when Boy was sick in the evening. And though Tom nobly resisted his undoubted privilege of saying "I told you so," after his warnings anent the orgy of chocolates, Susie put the words into his mouth, with the addition that it was all Polly's fault and he wished she had not come.

And though peace was restored over Boy's immediate and entire convalescence, there was a little sore feeling left behind, and a slight stiffness and unnaturalness in talking of Polly, so that they mutu-

ally avoided the subject, and talked of everything else under the sun — or, rather, to be more accurate, under the fog.

One of the subjects to which Tom resorted to fill up pauses in the conversation, was the plan of going down to Birches Farm. The idea had taken such hold on his imagination, and Susie's mind had always hitherto so faithfully reflected every whim or fancy, like or dislike of his own, that he confidently reckoned on her feeling, at any rate, much of the same delight and eager anticipation as he did.

It was very unreasonable of him, for what were the old landmarks to her — the hedge where his pony made its first leap, the woods where he and his sister went nutting, the brook where he caught his first trout, etc.? And, of course, he alone could feel the thrill in the veins and the swelling at the heart when he thought of getting a glimpse of Donnington Hall from that hill-side behind the farm, the dear old place that came involuntarily to his mind when he spoke or thought of home.

But before that foggy November day, when this story began, the placid little pool of Susie's mind would have mirrored all the sunlight that shone in Tom's sky at the prospect of seeing his boyhood's home again, even from a distance. But now something — perhaps Polly's visit, perhaps the consequent misunderstanding with Tom — had ruffled the surface of the little pool, and Tom became uneasily aware that it no longer reflected his feelings, and that his

enthusiastic descriptions of all they would do and see were falling a little flat. Then he was conscious, from a somewhat random answer, that her thoughts had wandered away to something else; and though she brought back her attention with an effort, a hastily-smothered yawn did not express very vivid interest in that ride of Tom's, which made his own eyes brighten and his heart beat as he described it. When he reached the culminating point of carrying home the brush in triumph, and the old squire saying, "Well done, lad, I'll buy you a new pony," there was a silence when he paused for a sympathetic response—a silence only broken by a long, peaceful breath—and looking round, he found that Susie's fashionably-dressed head had fallen back on the old woollen antimacassar in which Boy had been wrapped, and she was fast asleep.

After this Tom kept reminiscences and anticipations to himself; or, when, being of an exuberant and communicative nature, he could not contain himself, he found a vent for his feelings with Boy, who listened wide-eyed and open-mouthed, understanding, no doubt, a very small proportion of what he heard, but equally interested in it all.

These confidences were generally made when Susie was out of the way, and she only gathered that they took place from the appearance in Boy's play of fresh characteristics—long railway journeys round and round the room, ending in cries of "Postham! Postham!" which Susie knew to be the station for Donnington. And then Boy took long steps and

touched his forehead with a fat forefinger, as Farmer Day might be supposed to do ; and this was very soon followed by the discovery of a pig under the armchair, a troop of chickens by the sofa, and pigeons coming fluttering down from the dingy window cornice.

" What notions you put in the child's head ! " Susie would say, half-amused, half-annoyed at this ever strengthening freemasonry between father and son.

" How Boy will enjoy that day at Birches Farm," Tom said to himself ; " and Susie will, too, when she once gets there."

But he grew more and more to dwell on Boy's pleasure, which could safely be reckoned on, and to leave Susie's enjoyment, which was more uncertain, out of his calculations.

He was more away from home that Christmas time than he had been since his marriage — not on pleasure, though Polly made a little unbelieving *moue* when Susie said he was out on business, whenever her friend came to Corsham Street.

Polly very soon came to the conclusion that Susie was a neglected and hardly used wife, and that it was only because she was such a good, loyal little soul that she kept up the pretence that she had a good husband, who was devoted to herself and the child.

" Does it look like it ? " Polly argued. " A girl like Susie wandering about in the fog all alone ? And moping away in that hole of a place, Corsham Street, without a decent frock to put on ? And he,"

Polly remembered well, "such a swell always — so well turned out."

But now he was out every "mortal" time Polly went to see Susie. She said this after she had been there once ; but Polly was not very accurate. And then Susie wanted to make out that it was business took him away. Business indeed ! So much of the fun of the comic papers Polly delighted in turned on husbands hoodwinking confiding wives, or *vice versa*, that it was not likely she would be taken in by such transparent excuses.

Susie knew Tom too well to doubt for a minute that what he told her was absolutely true, and that he had to be present at various meetings and festivities to report for some paper ; and, moreover, that he would far rather have been at home, even in that "hole of a place," as Polly called it, with her and Boy. But still she found herself, somehow, taking kindly to the new part of neglected wife that Polly had created for her.

People are so apt to become, or to fancy themselves, what others think them. In some points, at any rate, we do "see ourselves as others see us," which is sometimes very different to what, in lucid intervals, when we stand face to face with ourselves, we know ourselves to be.

So Susie took on little injured airs, and smothered pathetic little sighs, and adopted a patient, long-suffering way of folding her hands on her lap and a submissive droop of the head, and began to pity herself very much and think herself, what it was

plain Polly thought her, a very ill-used and neglected wife.

Tom did not know what to make of her in those days, and thought she must be out of sorts, and did his best to cheer her up and amuse her; but it never occurred to his mind that any one could imagine he was away a minute more than he could help from her and Boy, so he did not think it necessary to explain such a palpable fact, and did not always take the trouble to tell her what kept him away or why he was detained, as Susie must know that such delays were more vexatious and disappointing to him than they could possibly be to her. He would come in to poor, long-suffering, pathetic little Susie so cheery and lively and bright that the silly little thing would think, "Oh, it's all very well for him when he goes about and gets such a lot of change and amusement! He would n't be so cheerful if he was sticking here all day, with nothing to do and nothing to see."

She did not guess how he had fretted and fumed over the delay, and been so surly and snappish to those with whom he came in contact that he got the character of being unsociable and bearish.

"Do you think he goes to see his own people?" Polly asked one day.

She had come in and found Susie crying, having worked herself up into an acute attack of self-pity, as Tom had gone out directly after breakfast and would not be home till quite late, and Boy had a little cold and was rather contrary and fretful.

"Do you think he goes to see his own people? Of course, it's rubbish about business. I expect he goes to his club; or, perhaps, some of his people are in town and he goes to them. Oh! I don't blame him if he's trying to set things straight with them; but I do think he ought to tell you. You don't think he can be trying to patch it up with them on the sly, and leaving you out? I should call it mean if he made it up with people that won't have anything to do with his own wife. He'd never do such a thing as that, would he?"

"Oh, no! he'd never do such a thing as that," Susie said. But, all the same, the suggestion once made was not to be banished from her mind; and she began to notice the letters Tom wrote, and those that he received, and to observe when he put any of them carefully away in his pocket—as he would sometimes when they contained appointments of time and place—being of infirm memory and afraid to trust to that unaided, having burnt his fingers frequently by letting such notices lie about on the table or find their way into the all-devouring waste-paper basket.

And one day it dawned upon her mind that this idea of Tom's of going down to his home neighborhood might be part of the plan of reconciliation with his family, in which she was to have no share—that he intended to go to Donnington and leave her and Boy at the farm, or, what would be worse still, take Boy to the Hall and leave her alone. Oh, it was too cruel! She could not endure that!

But this was a further development of the idea suggested by Polly that afternoon when she found Susie crying, and on that occasion they both agreed he would never do such a thing.

"But, all the same, it's too bad of him to leave you moping here; and, if I were you, I'd just have a little fun on my own account. Now, look here. Why should n't you come right off with me, and we'll have a little bit of dinner somewhere; and I'll get you an order for the Memnon, and I dare say you'll be home before he is, and no one the wiser? You've never seen me act — not properly, I mean — and I think you'll be surprised how I've come on since those old days. Not been to the theatre since you've been married? Well, I do call that a shame! Why, don't you remember, it used to be our greatest treat when we could get Mrs. Brown to take us at half-price after the Caledon? And we'd talk of it for days after, and especially you. You were always such a one for the play! Come, where's your hat?"

Susie had actually jumped up to prepare to carry out the programme proposed — not unlike that which the fairy godmother revealed to poor Cinderella as she sat among the ashes. Polly's magic wand had brought back the beauty into the childish, tear-stained face, so she might proceed to operate on a pumpkin and mice — though I think the former would hardly have been available in Corsham Street, even at the greengrocer's round the corner. But at the first step she took, her foot came on the squeaking apparatus

of a woolly lamb, which Polly had brought for Boy, and which gave a faint little note of expostulation, loud enough, however, to recall its owner to Susie's mind ; and she sat down again.

"There 's Boy," she said ; "I could n't go and leave him."

"Could n't you bring him along ? "

"No ; he 's got a little cold. I dare say he would n 't hurt ; but his father gets in such a dreadful way if there 's the least little bit the matter with him."

"Would n't the servant mind him ? "

"I don't like to ask her, and Boy can't abide her ; and they 've some new lodgers in the drawing-room that give a lot of trouble, and keep the girl running up and down pretty well all day. They 're old maids, and they keep up such a fidget if Boy cries. It 's not often he does — there could n't be a better boy for that ; but he 's been a bit fretty to-day, and I 've heard those old cats open the door and listen. And once they rang the bell and asked if there was anything the matter."

The brightness was fading out of the girl's face. Cinderella was settling down among her ashes and giving up all hope of the Prince's ball ; but again the fairy godmother intervened.

"What time does he go to bed ? "

"About eight, if his father does not let him stop up later ; he spoils him so. But I thought of putting him to bed earlier to-night, as he has a cold ; and he did n't have his nap this morning, so he 's sure to be sleepy."

"Well, then," said Polly, "why should n't we have a bit of tea together here, and then pop him into bed?"

"But," began Susie uneasily, thinking of the unattractive meal Mary Jane would bring up—stale bread and smeary butter, and the scrapings of a pot of raspberry jam, that Boy regarded as such a luxury.

"But—" "

"I'll just run out," Polly said, with a shrewd guess at the cause of Susie's hesitation, "and see if I can get something relishing. What do you say to a lobster? I noticed some in a shop as I came along. Don't you remember our lobster suppers at Mrs. Brown's? Bless me! What appetites we had! Mrs. Brown used to stare at the lots we ate. This is a bit of fun, I declare! Just like old days, going marketing. Have you a basket?"

And off Polly went, laughing and calling back to Susie, and chasing Boy, who had quite got over his awe of her by this time, and making such a clatter as made the old ladies in the drawing-room bristle with indignation.

The return of Polly and her basket was quite like a fairy-tale to Boy, and was described so often afterwards to his father, that inadvertently other things found their way into it—in fact, anything that particularly pleased that young gourmand's palate, he began to fancy must have been contained in that marvellous basket. Tom used to look rather odd when Boy described this incident, and Susie would try to distract his attention to another subject, and get a little red and defiant. But at the time, though

she protested faintly, and said, "Oh, Polly, you should n't ! It 's really too bad," and such like, she was really as much interested and pleased as Boy was, when first a lobster of noble dimensions made his appearance — though, indeed, he had been apparent before the basket was opened, protruding a bristling, scarlet face from under the cover — then a new loaf and a big pot of strawberry jam, a little jar of cream, and some crumpets, which Polly and Boy proceeded to toast till one of Boy's cheeks was almost the color of the lobster on the table.

They had a very merry tea, as the old ladies above could irritably have testified. Polly declared she had not enjoyed anything so much for ages ; Susie quite sympathized, but she did not say so much about it as Polly did for fear of betraying the barrenness of the land in general.

Boy's enjoyment of the strawberry jam was undisguised ; but Susie's anticipation of his being sleepy in consequence of not having had his morning nap was not justified, perhaps owing to the excitement of such a very sumptuous tea, or the interest of having one of the lobster's claws as a plaything, and opening and shutting its nippers.

So when tea was over, Boy's eyes were very bright and wide open, and there was a great deal to be said about the lobster claw, which had become a very distinct personality by that time — something akin to Punch, with a long red nose and turned-up chin, with a pocket handkerchief arranged to conceal the want of skull to balance such bold features.

Sleep? Nothing was further from his thoughts ; and when Susie undressed him in front of the fire and tried to quiet him down, Polly spoilt it all by giving way to an irresistible temptation to tickle the little round limbs, and to provoke the gurgles and bursts of laughter that ensued.

But the time was slipping away, and time and tide and the British public expecting the rise of the curtain wait for no man. Susie was all ready to go except for her hat, which had been kept discreetly out of sight for fear of Boy suspecting the intended desertion ; but he was sharp enough to see that something unusual was in the wind, and bright eyes watched through the bars of the crib all the girls' movements.

"There ! go to sleep like a good boy," Susie said at least half a dozen times, and tucked the clothes snugly round the small shoulders, only to see, a minute later, a curly head pop up or a small hand appear.

"It 's your fidgeting about," Polly said, "that keeps him awake. Come into the next room. We must go in ten minutes."

"Mammy ! Mammy !" called the little voice once or twice ; but presently there was silence.

"Come along," whispered Polly ; "I 'll just go and peep in, and then we must run for it. Yes, all right," she said when she came back, having in fact only listened at the door, "he 's as sound as a top. Come along."

But as the street door closed cautiously behind

them a small figure in a night-shirt appeared at the bedroom door, peeping round, half-daring, half-frightened at this bold step of climbing out of his crib and going to find mammy and the pretty lady—or “auntie,” as he was learning to call Polly—who were just having a game with him, and pretending not to hear when he called to them, and who would chase him back to bed and make believe to be very angry, and be laughing all the time.

Such a smiling, expectant little face! hardly controlling the ripple of baby laughter that would break out when he was discovered. The oilcloth was cold, and the mat prickly to small bare feet; but it was only a few steps from one door to another, and then he pushed open the sitting-room door with an excited little cry, only to find a dark room with the gas turned down and the fire burning low, and the lamp in the street outside throwing an uncanny sort of light through the blind into the empty room.

It was the first time in Boy’s short life that he had ever experienced the sense of desolation, the fear that Solomon tells us is “nothing else but a betraying of the succors which reason offereth;” and you cannot expect a great deal of reason at three years of age.

And then, as Mary Jane described it, “he pretty well roared the house down,” and the drawing-room ladies rang the bell and gave a week’s notice on the spot.

CHAPTER VIII

DESERTED BOY

Thorn for the camel, fodder for the kine,
And mother's heart for sleepy head, O little son of mine.
— RUDYARD KIPLING.

SUSIE had not had the least intention of concealing what she had done that night from Tom ; on the contrary, she had rather composed how she would inform him of it, and show him that though he left her moping alone and went off and enjoyed himself, other people gave her a chance of a little amusement on her own account.

Tom would be vexed, perhaps ; but any little tiffs there had been between them before, had always ended in such pleasant reconciliation that it was almost worth while to have a little quarrel for the pleasure of making up again.

And even if it were more serious than before — and she had seen Tom's brows draw together, and his eyes cloud in a very threatening manner on occasions — it was worth going through a good deal, she told herself, for the sake of those two hours of utter enjoyment, when she was taken clean out of herself, and forgot all the little bothering worries that seemed to make up so much of life in Corsham Street — mending stockings, putting on coals, order-

ing dinner with the necessity of considering every halfpenny, scraping and cheeseparing.

There was something exhilarating in the very atmosphere of the theatre — in the gradual filling up of stalls and dress-circle, in the tuning of the instruments in the orchestra, in the rolling up of the green curtain displaying the brilliant drop-scene, in the tap of the conductor's baton and the beginning of the overture, in the turning up of the footlights and the tinkle of the bell and the rise of the drop-scene.

But after that Susie was unconscious of everything around her, and entirely absorbed in the scene enacted before her on the stage. More than one of her neighbors in the upper boxes glanced with interest, not unmixed with amusement, at the girl's rapt face, leaning forward drinking in every sight and sound, and, in the more thrilling parts, unconsciously imitating some of the movements and gestures of the actors, with a little laugh of sympathy with the acted mirth, and with big eyes full of tears at a pathos of a very thin and commonplace character.

It was just like a child's interest as children used to be — for some of the *blasé* young people in the dress-circle below, criticised and found fault and whispered and sniggered at the very crisis of the play, and knew the age of the apparently girlish heroine, and detected the wrinkles and rouge through their opera-glasses, and were ready to put on cloaks and wraps and turn their backs on the stage when the

dénouement was only just reached, and when Susie was drawing a long breath of relief to find it was really all coming right.

And yet there was something more than the interest of a child — a real child, I mean, not a premature cynic. Susie was acting it all herself; and there was a throbbing consciousness that she had it in her, and that if she only had a chance she could act and make it all more real and passionate and life-like than even this that stirred her pulses so.

Polly was acting a subordinate part with great spirit and liveliness, and looking very pretty and *piquante*, but Susie hardly noticed her, so full was she of the general interest of the play; and it was with a little gasp that was almost a sob that she got up from her seat when she realized it was all over, and turned away from the dark baize curtain that had fallen, and left the fast-emptying house, and made her way, still with the glamour of the play on her, in a sort of dream through the gradually melting crowd outside the theatre, and along the streets towards Corsham Street.

"You had better cut and run directly it is over," Polly had said. "It's no use waiting about for me; and, I expect, the sooner you get home the better your old man will be pleased."

Susie's heart failed her a little as she came near home, though she stoutly maintained to herself that it was well worth enduring any lecture or bother she might be called on to endure; but, to her surprise, there was no light in their sitting-room, and Mary

Jane, who opened the door for her, told her that Tom had not yet come in.

"No ; nor missus either," she added. "It ain't once in a blue moon as she's out so late ; and she would have been in a way if she'd been at home just after you left, for Master Boy he found out as you'd gone, and he pretty well roared the house down. I did n't know what on earth to do with him, he were in such a way. I thought he'd have a fit. He got all purple in the face, and held his breath shocking."

I think by this time Susie had realized that two hours' perfect enjoyment could be too dearly paid for, and before Mary Jane had got half-way to this point in her slow, snuffling talk, Susie was by Boy's crib, where he lay asleep, with eyelashes still wet and cheeks flushed and smeared, and a little quivering sob breaking the even breathing, and a lobster claw clasped in one chubby hand.

"I don't know what the missus will say when she comes home neither, for they"—with an upward motion of the thumb towards the drawing-room floor—"for they've give notice to leave, all along of this row; and she's"—with a downward motion of the thumb—"bound to say as it's all my fault, and as she's sure I didn't answer the bell. Oh! I shall catch it from her, never you fear! As if I had n't had enough from them old cats upstairs, as went on at me a good 'un!"

"How did you quiet him?" Susie asked. What did old cats upstairs, or cross landladies, or servant

girls getting into scrapes matter as long as she could hear how Boy had been consoled?

"Oh! it were a business, I can tell you; and I had to tell him a heap of lies, as you'd just step out to fetch the supper beer, and would be in directly, and as I heard you coming and you would be in a way if you found him out of bed. And I look out of window, and made as though I could see you coming, and kep' it up till he began to quiet down like; and we found that old lobster claw, which seemed to kind of cheer him a bit. And then the bell rang and I had to leave him, and when I come back he'd just drop off, and ain't woke since."

Fortune favors the brave; and sometimes it curiously favors and even encourages and suggests deceit.

Mrs. Martin, instead of coming home in a bad temper as did occasionally happen—in which case any occurrence of far less importance than the drawing-rooms giving notice might produce that very unpleasant catastrophe, so aptly described as the fat being in the fire—came home in a beaming and benevolent mood, having met some old friends and lodgers who were anxious to return to their old quarters under her hospitable roof; and she had been debating all the way home how she could oust those same drawing-room ladies from their quarters to make room for them.

So really nothing could have happened more conveniently; and though she kept up a certain air of displeasure to Mary Jane, it was transitory and

not deep-seated, and when the drawing-room bell rang petulantly, she told her "never to mind, as gals ain't 'eathen slaves to be rung up all hours of the day and night. Let 'em ring ! just you finish your supper and go to bed."

And when after two or three furious peals, which only provoked a sardonic smile on the landlady's face, an acrid voice was heard at the top of the kitchen stairs inquiring if Mrs. Martin had come in, that lady rose with dignity and went upstairs ready for the fray.

"Are you aware that we have been ringing for that impudent girl the last half-hour?"

"Perfectly, ma'am ; and if you're alluding to my servant as that impudent girl, as an honester and more hard-working never breathed, she 've gone to bed, mum, as it 's half-past eleven, and time she were as have been on her feet all day."

"Perhaps she has informed you of the horrid disturbance there has been with that wretched child screaming — enough to split one's head."

"She did inform me, mum, as you give notice, which I 'm pleased to accept for this day week ; and 'ope you 'll find apartments more to your mind."

Now, the drawing-rooms had already repented themselves of that notice given, and had intended to be persuaded by an apologetic landlady to withdraw it, after holding it over her head till various advantages could be extorted ; so this ready acceptance of it rather took their breath away.

"Well, Mrs. Martin" — this in a decidedly smaller

voice, as it were from a lower platform — “my sister and I regret, for many things, having been driven to this ; and I think you will find it very difficult to let your rooms with that noisy, troublesome child downstairs, whose mother does not seem to have the slightest control over him.”

“ Much obliged I’m sure, mum ; but I ain’t let lodgings for twenty years come midsummer without knowing my own business. And as for the child, I will say that a better behaved, nicer little fellow I never come across, and his mother — pore, young thing, ’ardly more than a child herself — manages him wonderful, as I’ve often said to my ‘usband. But folks as ain’t no children of their own can’t be expected to understand. So I’ll wish you good-night, mum ; and next Thursday is the day as you’ll leave.”

And Mrs. Martin sailed out of the room.

It was certainly the first time, and the last, that the landlady took up the cudgels for Susie and Boy ; and I do not think Mary Jane either often came in for praise from her mistress. But when things turn out entirely to your satisfaction, you can relax your usual attitude of general depreciation and fault-finding just for once.

Then, too, when Tom came in he also was in excellent spirits. He had received payment for an article of his which he had altogether forgotten, and he actually had the sum in his pocket which would take them all down to Birches Farm comfortably for a couple of days ; and he was going to write to Mrs.

Day next morning and propose the visit. So it was really coming within measurable distance, and was not merely a pleasant dream that would probably come to nothing. And he was so sorry for being so late and for having left her alone, and he really looked quite pleased when, to explain the presence of the lobster claw in Boy's hand, Susie told him of Polly's visit and of her stopping to tea. And Susie was just going on to tell him of her going to the theatre, when Tom began about their going to Birches Farm, being glad to avoid further talk about Polly, which always produced an awkwardness between them and rubbed him up the wrong way.

"Well, anyhow, he 's sure to know to-morrow," she said to herself. "Boy will be full of his grievance."

And Susie smothered the motherly pang at the thought of forlorn, broken-hearted Boy resenting Mary Jane's clumsy efforts at consolation, by reflecting on how he was spoilt, and how most children were just put into bed and left without any fuss made over them. But again Boy carried out that characteristic of his of putting his elders in the wrong in their anticipation of his actions, for he woke up in the sunniest, happiest frame of mind — that clear shining after rain that is so beautiful in children as in Nature.

The storm of the night before had blown completely over, and only left a dim feeling that he had been a naughty boy, so that it was necessary now and then to assure his mother that he was good now, which brought the tears into her eyes, and made

Tom suspect that there had been one of their funny little tiffs. But Boy was mostly absorbed in a wish to tell daddy of the tea the night before, and the wonderful basket that had supplied it; and when he climbed out of his crib in the morning and roused his very sleepy father with a strong smell of lobster, and what he imagined to be a very cold little hand on his face — but which turned out to be that consolatory claw — it was not to prefer a charge of cruel desertion but to describe the delights of that magical basket.

CHAPTER IX

FROST

I wonder how there came, dear heart,
Into your life and mine,
A cloud that drove our ways apart,
And dimmed their light divine?

I wonder? — V. M. C. S.

THE beginning of February was the time Tom had fixed upon in his own mind for that visit to Birches Farm; but as part of the programme was to be a meet at the "Horse-shoes," it was no use thinking of it as long as the black frost, that came on in the middle of January, held sway.

An ugly thing is a black frost with a northeast wind, and especially in London, where there is little beauty at the best of times. It surely must have been a hoar-frost, with the sun on it glittering on trees and hedges, with every twig like a bit of white coral and each blade of grass fringed with diamonds — that the three children thought of in the burning fiery furnace when they bade the dews and frosts "bless the Lord, praise Him and magnify Him for ever;" and then again the "frost and cold," and yet once more the "ice and snow" — an unfair allowance it used to seem to me in my childish days for such wintry subjects, only to be explained by the remembrance of

that awful furnace heated seven times more than it was wont to be heated where the Benedicite was said to have been sung, and where the thought of cold, sharp air blowing over snowfields may have been refreshing.

Tom had written to Mrs. Day, and had received the hearty response he had reckoned on. He almost fancied he could smell the wood fire and the lavender as he opened the envelope ; and his eyes grew a little bit dim as he read the lines of welcome and pleasure at the prospect of seeing him still "Master Tom," and "his good lady"—fancy, Susie !—and the little master — eh, Boy ? The letter was full of that warm-hearted sincerity hampered in expression by a not very facile pen or fluent words, but quite unmistakable all the same, and more eloquent than the well-expressed sentences where the true ring is wanting.

"The master sends his duty ; and he looked round by the kennels on his way home from market, and Sweatly said as how one of the first fixtures after the frost breaks was bound to be at the 'Horse-shoes.' Miss Ann came in this afternoon about a setting of eggs as I'd promised to keep for them. I did n't say a word, but it was hard work to hold my tongue. You're not forgot, for I see her look at the apple-tree where you cut your name, and she gave a little sigh."

Tom could see the whole scene. Mrs. Day standing at the dairy door with bare, plump arms and broad beaming face ; and Ann, turning at the wicket gate into the yard to say good-bye, and to glance at the mossy, twisted apple-tree where T. B. still showed

— though the boy who cut the letters felt a very elderly, careworn *pater familias* by this time. Ann, with her gentle, refined face, more attractive now than in her earlier youth, with a certain little pathetic look in the delicate mouth and short-sighted brown eyes, that had settled there when a small love episode had come to an untimely end.

Tom had thought nothing of it at the time, or only as a joke, as younger brothers are apt to do, and wondered what Ann could see in such a muff; but now he lingered a little regretfully over the memory as he thought of her standing in her riding-skirt looking across at the apple-tree.

Out in the frosty sunshine by the dairy door is the churn, scrubbed to a lily whiteness — of which, in smutty London, one hardly dares to think for fear one's very thought should sully it — and the tin milk-pans a marvel of brightness.

Tom, waking suddenly from the contemplation of that vivid scene, became aware that Susie was watching him with a strange look in her blue eyes. Looking back on these January days in the light of subsequent events, Tom thought a change had come in Susie, which he blamed himself bitterly for not taking more note of — that she was no longer quite the simple, irresponsible child who would pout and sulk one minute and be coaxed back to happiness and laughter the next; who was pleased or vexed with trifles, and was hardly more to be reasoned with or depended on than Boy himself. He wondered afterwards that he had not noticed her

comings and goings more closely, and had not questioned what she was thinking of when she sat on that ragged carpet hassock on the hearth and gazed into the fire. But, for the matter of that, she had always been given to that listless gazing ; only now there was small temptation to look out into the dreary street, with the black patches of frozen water on the gray pavement betraying the shuffling footsteps of the passers-by, blue-faced and watery-eyed, who hurried by with their shoulders drawn up to their red ears and heads bent against the bitter wind.

Susie was not one of those women whose hands were always busy—a very useful quality, no doubt, to keep these hands out of mischief, but carried to a somewhat fidgeting extent by some, who cannot sit for a minute in peace without producing a little twiddling bit of crochet or tatting. But Susie certainly erred in the other direction ; and Tom used to wonder sometimes what his sisters at home used to be doing in those old times when they always seemed occupied, and interested in their occupations without making it aggressively apparent that they were so.

But now, if he had noticed the difference, Susie was less *unoccupied* than *preoccupied*. That visit to the theatre seemed to have worked some spell in the girl, called into being feelings and perceptions which Tom—and he certainly knew his wife's simple little mind more intimately than any one else—would never have credited her with. He was

very loyal to his young wife, and never even to himself acknowledged how soon you reached to the limit of her understanding ; and perhaps this very loyalty kept him from discovering the change in her, for he kept steadily in view that she was sweet and innocent and loving, and avoided exploring her nature further for fear of running his head against the limitations which he did not wish to realize.

So now when she had, as it were, eaten of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, he did not detect the difference. It was not only that she was stage-struck—enthralled by the interest of the drama she had seen, which she went through again and again as she sat by the fire in Corsham Street ; nor was it only that she felt the power of acting stirring within her, and a wild longing to show how she could do it if she only had a chance ; but a new light seemed suddenly to have been thrown on Tom and herself and their marriage. It had all seemed so natural. There had been no doubt for a moment when Tom stood looking down at her with the love-light in his eyes, she had just put her hand in his without any hesitation. He loved her and she loved him, so they married ; there was no other way. But for the first time now, looking back, she began to wonder if they had not been very foolish to fancy that sweet primrose path of young love, just wide enough for them two, sunny and pleasant as it was, was the only way.

Now, with eyes opened to that cold, reasonable electric light knowledge that had come instead of the

Joy that lingers still,
Which Eve brought out of Eden—
With scent of dew and daffodil
When all the air was laden,

she could discern another path she might have climbed — alone, it is true, but still pleasantly leading to affluence, as it had done Polly ; and even, Susie told herself with flushing cheeks and beating heart, to something beyond Polly — to a more brilliant success and distinction.

And Tom ? Well, in those days for the first time she realized what their marriage had cost Tom. Oddly enough, it was only when it came across her that marrying him had cost her something by cutting short her artiste's career that might have been so brilliant, did it dawn upon her that he had sacrificed all his prospects for her sake, and that it did not seem very likely that his family would ever be reconciled.

Never, by word or look, had Tom ever made her feel how much he had given up ; and if he had guessed what was passing in her mind, he would have laughed to scorn the idea that he had made any sacrifice, and stoutly maintained that he would do it all over again without a moment's hesitation for her and Boy. But going back over the four years of their married life, Susie gathered up words and tones and looks, and built them up into very substantial regrets ; she wove in with them, too, Polly's suggestions that he might be trying to make things straight with his family independently of her, and, combining

it with her own idea that the visit to Birches Farm might be a step in that direction, she made up altogether a very heart-breaking and harrowing subject for reflection as she gazed into the red caverns in the fire — reflections which, if only Tom could have guessed, would have been demolished with a few hearty loving words, as those red caverns were occasionally by a heavy onslaught with the poker.

"Poor Tom!" she would say to herself, looking at his frayed wristbands and remembering the dandy undergraduate lover of four years ago. "Poor Tom! if I were only out of the way, it would all come right with his people."

She said this once to Polly, who, instead of contradicting it, as Susie expected, took it up seriously.

"Well, I don't think it would be at all a bad thing for you to keep clear out of the way while he sets matters straight. If he were to take that precious Boy of yours to display to grandpapa and grandmamma, you'd see the job would be done in no time. It certainly would make it a lot easier if you weren't there. Look here, Susie, come for a run with me over to America, and leave him to patch up matters. I'm quite sure I could get the Signor to take you into the company — at a small salary, of course, for you'd want a lot of coaching; but still it would be something. He saw you that night with me at the theatre, and he's regular gone on you, I can tell you, and said more pretty things than I'd care to tell you. And there's always an uncertainty about Miss Tufton; she's a bit queer

and touchy, and takes offence as soon as look at you. I think the Signor's a bit tired of her tantrums ; and she's not such a very great star after all. There's only just one or two parts she can do decently, and even with them she's uncertain ; and she takes a lot of making-up to look well, though, to hear her talk, you'd think there never was such a beauty. And she's fanciful, too, about her health, and a great deal too free with her doctor's certificate that the state of her health will not allow her to appear. If she had such a bad cough as I get, there'd be some excuse. And that's another reason why I wish you were coming ; if I break down out there, away from every one, I don't know what would become of me. I'm not a croaker — I've never missed a single rehearsal since I've been in the company ; but I tell you I do feel pretty bad sometimes. Well, I suppose it's no use wishing ! Who'd be married, I'd like to know, to be tied hand and foot like you are, with never a chance of a bit of fun, and feeling all the time, as you say, that he'd have more chance of getting straight if you were away ? Well, anyhow, you'll come to the dinner before we start ; it's to be at the 'Cri,' and every one brings a friend, and there's no one I care to ask except you, though, I tell you, there's lots who'd just give their heads to be asked."

"I'll come if I can," said Susie.

CHAPTER X

A NEW DRESS

When love begins to sicken and decay
It useth an enforced ceremony.

There are no tricks in plain and simple faith.

— SHAKESPEARE.

THE 8th of February was the day for the farewell dinner to Contarini's company before their departure for America ; and as January ended and February began with frost and fog and general dreariness, Susie was greatly exercised in her mind how she should be able to keep her promise to Polly that she would be present at the festivity, and how, if she went, she could dress for the occasion.

She could not bring herself to make a clean breast of the matter to Tom. He was a good deal occupied in those days, as I have said, and he used to come in tired and cold, and not, Susie thought, in a mood to be bothered with what she knew would be a distasteful subject. And though being busy was likely to mean more money coming in, he was less inclined even than usual for small extravagances, and scrutinized the weekly bills in a manner very exasperating to Mrs. Martin.

He was, as Susie guessed, saving every penny for

that visit to Birches Farm, the prospect of which had by this time lost every attraction it had ever possessed for Susie, who only regarded it with dread.

How could she ask him to spare the money out of his small hoard, to squander it (so he would regard it) on a dress that she might never wear again, at an entertainment which, no doubt, he would despise, and to which he had much rather she would not go?

So she kept putting off the evil day of opening this unpleasant subject till February had actually begun, and it was within a week of the dinner, and no further delay was possible if the dress was to be ready for the occasion. "I've never asked him for a dress before, and it's only just this once; and Polly is going away and most likely will never come back again, so he need n't be afraid of ever being troubled again. I should n't like her to be ashamed of me, when most likely the others will all be so smart."

And the color came into her cheeks and her eyes brightened, in spite of her nervousness, at the thought of the Signor's compliments which Polly had let leak out from time to time, though she had begun by protesting that she would not repeat such rubbish.

"I don't mind how shabby I go for the rest of my life," she said, ruefully contemplating the front of her skirt, down which Boy had spilt his milk that morning. "I'm sure if Tom does not mind my being shabby I don't know why I should! And he used to like to see me look nice."

So one day she took her courage in both hands, and braced herself up to the resolution that she would

begin directly he came in, even if he came in as late as he had done for several nights past and as tired.

But she had hardly made up her mind on this point and resolved to think no more of the matter all the rest of the day for fear that her courage should ooze away in the hours that must elapse before she could carry out her intention, when Tom himself appeared at twelve o'clock, coming striding in and catching her and Boy both together up in his arms, waltzed round the room with them like a great rough schoolboy.

Boy, of course, was delighted, and shrieked with enjoyment, and Susie could not resist the infection of husband and child's merriment, and was constrained to laugh too.

But her resolution was shaken out of her by this unexpected outburst of Tom's high spirits, and when she had recovered her breath Tom proceeded to sweep away her intentions as completely as he had swept her and Boy off their chair.

"Don't you see, Susie? don't you see, you little blind mole? Where are your eyes, little stupid? Have you been asleep ever since I went out, and dreaming of frost and hard roads? Why, only look at my boots!—don't they tell you what has happened?"

And Tom stuck out a very muddy boot, which Boy at once proceeded to clasp to the bosom of a clean pinafore.

"Why, it's a thaw! A beautiful, warm, thorough thaw! The streets are perfectly filthy!" This in a

tone of exultation, as if filth were the most desirable condition for thoroughfares.

"And it's not one of those deceptive sort of thaws that delude you into thinking the frost is over, just to come back worse than ever next day; it's a regular, steady old business. Any fool could manage the weather forecasts for the next week or so. Do you know, as I came round the corner just now I could have sworn I smelled the damp earth from the plough-lands, and just a whiff of violets along with it. Oh, don't tell me that they have a few little measly bunches of violets at the greengrocer's! — this was the real thing straight away from the country. And then, what next, Mistress Susie Bannister? What do you think, Master Boy — eh? Well, then, look here!" ,

And Tom dragged a crumpled newspaper by main force out of his pocket and pointed triumphantly to a place where Susie could just make out the words "Hunting Appointments" before Boy caught at it and pulled it down over him, suffering total eclipse from its voluminous pages.

"Why, the East Marlshires meet at the 'Horse-shoes' next Friday! There's luck! So I committed an act of hideous extravagance and telegraphed — yes, expended a whole blessed sixpence in telegraphing to Mrs. Day to expect us next Thursday. It would have done every bit as well to have written, but I could n't resist doing something foolish to commemorate the occasion."

Tom was busy making the newspaper up into a

cocked hat for Boy, so he did not notice Susie's face, which wore a startled, terrified look that would have puzzled him if he had observed it, and he altogether misinterpreted her silence and the faltering "But, Tom—" that finally broke it.

"Oh yes, I know just what you are going to say" (Susie gasped, wondering how he could possibly have guessed), "and I've been thinking about that, too. It's a dress you want, isn't it?"

Susie's eyes grew round with amazement.

"Oh, bless its little heart! I know its little vanities; and I might have been home half an hour sooner only I've been flattening my nose against the windows of all the dress shops I've passed, and at last I saw exactly the sort of thing. So off with you and put on your hat, and we'll go and inspect. Oh, you need n't look so alarmed! I've got the money to pay for it, and perhaps a trifle over to turn out Boy a swell into the bargain. I tell you we're going to do the business in style."

Susie's momentary idea that Tom had in some miraculous way come to know of the dinner-party and her need of a dress for it, had been extinguished almost as soon as it flashed into her mind, and as she went to put on her hat, she made up her mind that there was an end of all her plans, for that very Thursday on which Mrs. Day was to expect them at Birches Farm was the day of Polly's farewell dinner.

If it had not been for that, and for feeling thwarted and prevented from carrying out her intentions, what

could have been more delightful than that morning with Tom in such uproarious, high spirits? He was once more the light-hearted boy she had married instead of the grave, hard-working, harassed man he had been of late. He was holding out, too, the prospect of what she had often longed for and desired — a change and holiday away from the dullness and monotony of Corsham Street ; and he was not only showing thoughtfulness and generosity about the new dress, but, what was still more remarkable, he was able to gratify such feelings which had so often to be rigidly repressed on account of want of means.

Why, three months ago Susie would have thought that to go out with Tom and buy a new dress was too delightful a thing to be possible ; and now she was getting ready to go out, with a dull sort of feeling almost amounting to resentment. Oh, dear ! if one is crying for the moon it is simply exasperating to be offered the most resplendent planet.

Tom's selection of a dress that he thought would be exactly the sort of thing, had been largely assisted by memories of what his sisters used to wear — very vague memories they were, too, for brothers are not apt to notice particularly their sisters' costumes — and the Misses Bannister's style of dress was of the quiet and lady-like and unobtrusive sort that does not imprint itself on the mind.

So the coat and skirt Tom set his mind on was of a very quiet and neat description, not at all what Polly would have called smart ; indeed, I think

she might have used the word "dowdy" in describing it.

If Susie had been quite herself that afternoon, I think she would not have fallen in so readily with Tom's choice, but have made an effort to get something more in Polly's style. Even Tom, in all the glamour of high spirits and delightful anticipation, was struck and a little bit disappointed at the quiet way in which she took it.

"Why, sweetheart," he said anxiously, "what's amiss? Don't you like it, Susie? Bless my heart! What a funny girl you are!" For his words had brought tears welling into Susie's blue eyes, and, regardless of the attentive young man who was displaying the costumes, Tom caught hold of her hands.

But she pulled them pettishly away. "Of course I like it, Tom. How can you be so ridiculous?"

And Tom, with a little sigh over the inexplicable vagaries of the feminine mind, turned to the more satisfactory business of trying a little rough scarlet coat on Boy; and a big Tam-o'-Shanter to match, turned up with an eagle's feather on one side.

There was no doubt about Boy being pleased, and all the shop assistants within sight or hearing of the little scarlet-clad figure were sadly distracted from their own legitimate customers, and even the elaborately polite shop-walker forgot his elegance and stood looking at the scene with a broad smile.

Boy was not to be persuaded to take off his new splendors but must needs walk home in them,

which, considering that the streets were in that delightfully filthy condition described by Tom so rapturously, was rather a risk.

Tom was busy superintending the crossing of a particularly muddy street, when he became conscious that Susie had left his side, and was talking at a shop door to some one whom he guessed to be Polly.

Out of the corner of his eye he was aware of furs and highly-curled fringe and feathers, and a general air of smartness, and he could hear a voice pitched a little too loud for his fastidious taste, so he pretended to be entirely absorbed in piloting Boy through the mud, till he was safely round the corner and out of sight and hearing.

He was vexed with himself then, and wished he had gone up like a man and shaken hands with Polly, and been cordial and pleasant. Susie would have been pleased, and he really had no dislike to the girl; he had always rather liked her than otherwise, and thought her good-natured and unaffected. He had not intentionally avoided her since she and Susie had renewed their friendship, but had always felt rather glad that he happened to be out when she came and had not met her when he was out with Susie. If she had only been shabby and poor and out-at-elbows, Tom would have been kindness and cordiality itself, and would not have minded how loud she talked or how much she murdered the Queen's English; but he revolted at such things combined with smartness and prosperity, and es-

pecially with the irritating inner consciousness that Susie was admiring and perhaps envying the morocco and gilding of the binding, and did not appreciate the commonness and want of refinement in the letterpress.

But he was sorry that he had given way to this cowardly feeling of repugnance, though he did not guess how great a difference it might have made in his after life if Polly had not been keenly aware that Susie's fine gentleman husband — still very fine and very much a gentleman in spite of his shabby coat — had very obviously avoided her.

CHAPTER XI

A HOLIDAY

How sour sweet music is
When time is broke and no proportion kept;
So is it with the music of men's lives.

— SHAKESPEARE.

THAT Thursday, 7th February, dawned as bright and spring-like as early February can sometimes be, enticing poor, deluded mortals into the belief that the winter is past, the rain is over and gone, and the time of the singing of birds is come. And not only poor, stupid, slow-witted humanity is so deceived, but highly-gifted birds and beasts, with that great, superior intelligence which we call instinct, and which we talk patronizingly of because we have not got it and do not understand it — even these build nests and sing love-songs and frisk and frolic in the sunshine ; and buds swell on branches that might have been dead and dry yesterday, and crinkled primrose leaves push through the earth, and the willow branches blush into coral, and all of a sudden there are catkin tassels dancing on the hazels.

Well, let us enjoy it while it lasts, and before the frost comes back and the driving snow and the bitter east wind.

Boy was quite prepared to enjoy it, though none

of these miracles of early spring were apparent in Corsham Street, nor would have been appreciated by him if they had been there. But a red coat and hat were hanging on the end of his crib to meet his waking eyes, and he knew they were to be worn when he went in — what, as a very little boy, nearly a week ago, he might have called a puff-puff, but which he now, with the superior wisdom of age, designated as a train.

Beyond that, he had a very hazy idea of the delights in store for him, only indistinctly imagining a combination of the Zoölogical Gardens and the picture of the Garden of Eden in the Sunday picture-book, and the confectioner's shop of that memorable evening when he went to post the letters.

Tom was roused in the gray dawn — not a very early hour in February — by small cold hands patting over his sleepy face, and inquiries in a breathless whisper, “Is 'oo asleep?”

The tremendous snore which replied to this question did not for a moment deceive the inquirer, such is the superhuman acuteness of the young ; and Boy began at once to burrow his way under the bedclothes with much wriggling of cold young toes.

The conversation that ensued was conducted in low tones, as Susie was supposed to be asleep ; though it must have been very profound slumber to have been proof against such eel-like wrigglings and excited outbursts of irrepressible crowing delight when words failed, as they did very often.

Susie, in after days, recalled ever so much of the

nonsense that the sweet little voice chattered, and Tom's amused answers, though she took no apparent notice of them at the time.

They were to start by the ten o'clock train, and Tom and Boy were well on with their breakfasts when Susie came in, having been packing the bag they were to take with them.

"Why, my dear girl," Tom said as she came in, "have n't you got your new dress on? You must have some breakfast; and we sha'n't have any too much time. Why, Boy wanted to have his coat on last night — did n't you, Boy? — for fear there should not be time to fasten all these big buttons. Well?" he said a little impatiently, as Susie stood by Boy's side assisting a spoonful of bread and milk more directly into the mouth open to receive it.

And then, with a desperate effort, Susie brought out the words which she had been rehearsing for the last week, and which seemed to stick in her throat now, and came out with a jerk in an odd, unnatural tone quite different from her usual voice.

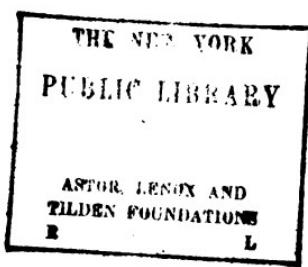
"I don't want to go. I'm going to stay at home."

"Not go!" Tom nearly dropped his cup, half-way to his mouth, in the utter surprise that these words of Susie caused him. "Not go? Why, my dear girl, why ever not? It's too late now to alter it; everything's fixed and settled. We could n't put it off. What's the matter? Something wrong with the dress? Oh, never mind! The old one will do quite as well. I thought you took it a bit too easy about the trying on and fit."



'I want you just to take Boy and leave me at home.'

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"Oh, it 's not that ; the dress is all right. And I don't want anything put off ; only I want you just to take Boy and leave me at home."

She saw his face alter and darken, and the boyish look of light-hearted enjoyment die out of it ; and she gave a little gasp as if she would have caught back the words that had clouded the sunshine.

"Leave you behind ? A likely story ! Do you really mean it, Susie?" He had got up and laid his hands on her shoulders, and was looking down into her face. "Why did n't you tell me before ? Don't you really want to go ? "

If her eyes had once met his I think she would have given in at once, and hidden her face in that waistcoat which he had cleaned up and brushed so carefully last night — for nothing had been expended on his own preparations for the holiday. She would have sobbed out that she did want to go, and that she was sorry, and would be ready directly ; but instead of this she twisted her shoulders away from his grasp, and turned away to the fire in sullen silence, in which she heard Tom give an irrepressible little sigh of disappointment.

Then he sat down and retrieved some imminent disaster in Boy's plate, for it is not conducive to safe carriage from plate to mouth when eyes are travelling from father to mother in awed bewilderment.

"All right, Boy, there 's no hurry ; we can finish our breakfast at our leisure. We must try and think of something jolly to make up — the Zoölogical, with

plenty of monkey-house, or the ducks in St. James's Park — eh, Boy? Come, Susie," with a little wistful pull at the girl's sleeve, "won't you think better of it? It would be a bit of a disappointment after having looked forward to it for such a long time."

"I don't want you to be disappointed," Susie said. "I want you to go. I'm not very well; I've a wretched headache, and I should n't enjoy it a bit and only spoil your pleasure."

"Not well? Poor little girl! Why didn't you tell me? I'm afraid I've been so taken up with this ridiculous holiday of mine" — with a little rueful laugh — "that I have n't noticed you were seedy. Let's look at you, Susie. Don't you think that a breath of country air and a change out of this" — with a look round the dingy little room with a momentary relaxation of the strict self-control that usually kept the disgust and weariness of his surroundings out of sight — "would do the headache good and freshen you up? The air up at Birches Farm is so sweet and fresh. Why, I actually dreamt of it last night; it makes you feel quite another person just to breathe it."

There was certainly a strong tendency to relent just then in Susie's heart; but it is so very difficult to relent gracefully, and so much easier to go on in pettish opposition.

"It's not only that," she said, "but to-morrow's Polly's last day in England. She is going to America, and I dare say I shall never see her again; and she had set her heart on seeing me to say good-bye."

"Oh!" he said. "Oh—h—h!" drawing out the word as if he were slowly taking in an idea, and a painful idea, too, "then you never meant to go all along? And you let me go on thinking you were going, when you meant to turn tail at the last moment?"

The reproachfulness of his tone stung her to the quick, barbed by the truth of what he said.

"It's so unfair of you to say that!" she said. "It's all very well for you, who've got a lot of relations, and I dare say they're all very fine and superior to me and Polly, but she's the only one I've got belonging to me, and it does seem hard that I should not stay and see the last of her; and she'll be dreadfully disappointed if I don't. I don't want to interfere with your pleasure. You and Boy can get on very well without me, and it's only for a couple of days; and when you come back Polly will be gone, and there'll be an end to all this unpleasantness."

"What unpleasantness?"

"Oh! you have n't said anything, but I could see well enough that you could n't bear Polly coming here; and you even passed her in the street without as much as looking at her."

Tom sat reflectively tapping on the table, where his half-finished breakfast lay. He hated a scene, as most men do; and the prospect of a day with Susie in this temper was far from attractive, and, in addition, the prospect of a farewell visitation from Polly, whom he endowed in imagination with far

more airs and graces and affectation than that kind-hearted creature really possessed. He was still enough of a boy, too, to feel disappointment very keenly, not having had long experience of life's hard lessons, though, perhaps, after all, the disappointments of age are more bitter and crushing, since, in spite of what the poet says of hope springing eternal in the human breast, it soon loses its vigor and strength when youth has gone.

He had built almost more than he knew on those two days — on the sight of home even at a distance, on sweet air and sunshine, and country cleanliness and wholesome farm-house fare. The thought had carried him through months of fog and frost, and uncongenial work and sordid surroundings, and he could not give it up without a pang.

And then, too, as I have said, he had of late thought more of how Boy would enjoy this, that, and the other, than of Susie's more doubtful appreciation, so that it was just possible to imagine the programme carried out without her, though it had never occurred to his mind till this moment that it could be.

And then his eye fell upon the clock, and he saw that there was just time; and a great yearning rose in his heart for the old country and the old familiar faces. He got up and put his hand on Susie's shoulder, but it was not quite with the loving, coaxing touch of a few minutes ago, and his voice sounded a little bit stiff and cold.

"Look here, Susie, don't let us have any nonsense about it. Do you really mean that you had rather I

went without you, and that you'd honestly prefer stopping to say good-bye to your cousin?"

"Of course I do," she answered pettishly; "is n't that just what I've been saying?"

"Very well," he said, and his hand dropped away from her shoulder. "I should never have proposed going at all if I had thought you would not care about it, and of course it just spoils all the pleasure of it to me; but since it's all settled, and those good souls down there will be expecting us, I think, perhaps, I had better go and take Boy, and we must make the best of a bad job. And besides," he said, trying to keep the irritation out of his tone, and speaking kindly, "besides, I dare say you and Polly will like to have the last day to yourselves; so brighten up, little girl, and give me a kiss, and don't look so gloomy over it. There are no bones broken, and we shall understand each other better another time. We must be off if we are to catch that train."

She was buttoning up Boy's coat with very trembling fingers, glad to keep her quivering lips and filling eyes out of sight of the eyes that followed her with an appealing look that she felt rather than saw, and which was hard to resist. If he only could have guessed how near she was to relenting over that last button, which, somehow, seemed so difficult to fasten!

The electricity in the air had communicated itself to Boy, and though generally to go anywhere with father was the height of enjoyment, now he made a little fuss at leaving his mother, and caught at her dress with a little puckering of the bright face and a

tremulous demand for "muzzer" to come too — treasured memories in after days.

"Come, Boy!" said Tom, and caught up the bag. "Good-bye, Susie; take care of yourself. We shall be back as early as we can on Saturday. And say good-bye for me to Polly, and say something kind. I didn't really see who it was the other day when we met."

And then they were gone — the patter of Boy's feet and Tom's step in the passage, and then the door shut with the bang Mrs. Martin had so often protested against.

"Tom, oh! Tom, come back! Wait for me, Tom! I want to come! I don't want to stop behind! I don't want you to go without me! It was n't true what I said! Oh, Tom, come back!"

Susie was sobbing her heart out just inside the street door; and only a few paces down the street, Tom, all unconscious of Susie's tardy repentance, was hesitating and expressing his uncertainty to the small scarlet person at his side.

"I've half a mind to go back, Boy; I don't at all like leaving her. We might go down by a later train."

But Susie turned back sobbing into the sitting-room to throw herself on the horse-hair sofa, and bury her face in Boy's antimacassar, and Tom went gloomily on to Euston Station.

And so Tom and Susie parted.

CHAPTER XII

BIRCHES FARM

This is the place. Stand still, my steed.
Let me review the scene,
And summon from the shadowy past
The forms that once have been.—LONGFELLOW.

“POSTHAM! Postham!” It was just as Tom had described it to Boy. And there was the farmer, as the train slowed into the little country station, standing very firm on gaitered and rather bow legs, and with one finger half-way to his forehead, in preparation of the greeting, the fashion of which Boy had rehearsed so often.

Boy had been asleep—at least there had been a long interval of quiet after that last bun, when the red Tam-o’-Shanter got a little crushed against his father’s arm—and Tom had time to chew the cud of sweet and bitter fancies undisturbed, the latter predominating largely at first but by degrees giving way to the former, as they will in youthful ruminations.

Out of London—that in itself meant a good deal to a country-bred man like Tom—with a blue sky dappled by white clouds above seen without a haze of smoke or fog in between, with a changing landscape on either side; rich, brown ploughed lands

stretching away, some of them shot already with the pale green of the early corn; meadows beginning to brighten into verdure out of the rusty, dull hues of winter; beautiful, bare trees revealing the graceful outlines of trunk and branch that the summer foliage, lovely as it is, conceals; shining, erect holly-trees, and rugged Scotch firs with ruddy stems, give color and variety to the woods and coppices, melting in the distance into a beautiful, soft, hazy blue.

Though Tom was sad and sore and smarting from that parting with Susie, he could not help a little thrill of delight as he noticed these things, being one of those who seek out those manifold works and have pleasure therein. Before that particular "work" in which Tom took special pleasure had gone to sleep, reflection, either sweet or bitter, was liable to constant interruption by delighted recognition of cows and sheep and horses from the window, all of them, owing to Boy's difficulty in realizing the effect of distance, being regarded as very minute — quite amusingly so — and altogether different from the big animals he was used to see in the streets harnessed in vehicles or on their way to the cattle-market; and I think it was a little bit of a disappointment on reaching Birches Farm to find that they did not possess any of these very diminutive creatures.

By and by, when Boy was asleep, Tom began to recognize landmarks and familiar bits of country as the train puffed on — a row of ricks that he used to

count when he was a boy travelling along that line to school ; a mill with a wheel going lazily round, and white pigeons flying up as if they might be larger particles of the flour that settled on shutters and window-ledges and on the burly miller himself, looking up at the passing train ; a river with willows beginning to show red tips to their branches, and bits of ice from the late frost still remaining along the edges of the osier bed, and the brown dry reeds to notify that it was still winter.

Tom remembered once going fishing there, out of a — Yes, there it was, the punt, only dilapidated and half-full of water.

He even thought he recognized, near one of the stations — and this was yet twenty miles or more from Postham — an old hedger and ditcher chopping away with a bill-hook and holding back the brambles with hands in big leather gloves. But there are hundreds of such old fellows so employed, twisted and bent with rheumatism and age, with ruddy, weather-beaten faces, and patient, frosty blue eyes and nut-cracker jaws ; so it was ridiculous of Tom to feel a warm thrill of recognition and a wish to wave his hand and shout a greeting to him, and inquiries after “ the missus.”

But there was no accounting for what Tom might do as the train approached Postham — and recognition may well be confused when eyes are inclined to get suddenly dim ; and altogether, as he told himself, he was disposed to make a regular ass of himself.

Well, there was the farmer ; and Boy was wide

awake and full of excitement and eagerness to get out.

A new station-master, who looked on superciliously at these humble friends of the old farmer's and spoke patronizingly to Boy as he took the tickets at the gate in the white palings, outside which the cart was waiting with a solid white horse in it with hairy feet.

The old porter, Irons, whose recognition Tom half dreaded, half-hoped for, was out of the way laid up with rheumatics, Mr. Day said; and Tom turned away to answer some question of Boy's about the engine, when a groom rode up on a showy chestnut and shouted to the station-master to know if there was any parcel for the 'All.

Tom smiled a little to himself at the airs of the groom, whom he remembered a lad in a very humble capacity in the stables, and at the politeness of the station-master, who had not much courtesy to spare for Farmer Day's friends.

Tom would dearly have liked to have had the handling of the pretty, skittish chestnut, who pricked her dainty ears and danced and sidled as the train puffed out of the station; and he lifted Boy into the farmer's cart with a little sigh of regret, and a doubt if, after all, he had not been a fool to come to the old scenes in such different circumstances.

But to Boy the farmer's cart gave unmitigated satisfaction, the very jogging up and down and the jolt when the wheel passed over a stone only adding to the pleasure. He had been in so few vehicles in

his life before, and those mostly of the omnibus description, so he rather blinked and shuddered when the farmer first gathered up the reins and the big white horse got under way, as if they might be starting on a Mazeppa, or, at any rate, a John Gilpin career. But once having got used to the leisurely movement of the broad, white back in front and the amiable jogging of the hairy ears, he found it vastly exhilarating, and shouted with delight when the stumpy whip was applied, though it produced no other effect than the wagging of a patient tail. And then, to crown it all, he was allowed to hold the whip, both hands being necessary for the purpose, and after knocking off the farmer's hat, and nearly over-balancing himself with the effort, brought it to bear on Dobbin's back ; that hardened beast, however, appeared scarcely conscious of this tremendous onslaught, but went placidly on its way, wondering, perhaps, at flies beginning to settle so early in the season.

The farmer kept up a steady flow of deliberate conversation, with a great deal of repetition ; and when Boy was not occupied with the whip and Dobbin, he could not take his eyes off the farmer's face, which he studied with that absorbed interest with which children sometimes so embarrass their elders.

But the farmer was not self-conscious, so the Medusa herself might have gazed at him with impunity ; and he had also that curious country habit of not looking at the person he was addressing but

fixing his eyes on some spot in the middle distance, and only indicating by a jerk of the head for whom the remark was intended, which was perplexing at first to Boy, who was not sure that the remark "Come, get on with ye, lazy-bones," was not directed to him; or that "He be a peart youngster, and no mistake!" did not bear some mysterious reference to something about the horse's ears or just beyond them.

He was altogether mystified when the farmer pulled up suddenly at the brow of a hill with the ejaculation "There abe!" and his father leant forward, gazing — with that drawn-back mouth of which mention has been made as of a horse reined in — at a glimpse seen through a vista of bare trees and coppices of an old square stone house a couple of miles away across undulating country, plough land, meadows and park, across which the low sun was casting long shadows from groups of fir-trees and evergreen plantations.

There was a horse going along that bit of road towards the house — no doubt the chestnut they had seen at the station; and a company of rooks were flapping their way solemnly homewards to the elms beyond the Hall, where generations of them had built their untidy nests and swung on the top branches, and cawed and quarrelled and hatched their young.

They were going home, Tom told himself, with that look in his face that Moses might have had looking across Jordan at the promised land: or David, when he thought of "the water of the well of Bethlehem, which is by the gate."

"All right!" he said with a little harsh tone in his voice, though he laughed. "We had better be jogging on. I had forgotten you could see the old place from here.—Hullo, Boy, whip up! We want our tea—don't we?"

Ten minutes more and there is the farm, and there is Mrs. Day standing at the door looking out for them from the hospitable porch. The low sun is shining on the diamond panes of the windows and on the plump cheeks of the farmer's wife (she has to shield her eyes from its glitter), and on the breath of the cows gathered in the big yard for milking. Hwit! Hwit! goes the milk into the tin pail, but stops for a minute while Jenny the milk-maid raises her sun-bonnet from its resting-place against the warm side of Cowslip or Sweetlips to look at the arrivals.

There is a rush of dogs with various notes of welcome and inquiry, which makes Boy blink and relinquish his manliness so far as to allow his father to carry him in: though, even so, an irrepressible foxhound puppy must needs rear its long, soft body up and lay a large foot on Tom's arm to make closer acquaintance with the small person in a red coat.

Boy, though he would have scorned the suggestion, was a little bit tired, and, as I have said, the cows at Birches Farm were of the large size, unlike those seen from the railway or in the Noah's Ark; and passing through the yard there were large faces and terrible horns in rather horrifying proximity, a situation which

makes the stoutest heart think of mother and feel a not altogether unpleasing memory of tea-time at Corsham Street.

"Bless his little heart! Why, he do feature your family, Master Tom — begging your pardon! but it comes that natural, it slips off my tongue accidental like. Why, any one could tell he was a Bannister without looking twice; he's his grandpa all over. And your good lady ain't come after all? Well, I am sorry. I hope she enjoys good health? And I'm sure I'd have done my utmost to make her comfortable, though, of course, we're a bit rough here and can't pretend to have it all as nice as she's used to."

Tom gave a little laugh that was half a sigh as he thought of Corsham Street, while he assured Mrs. Day that it was not at all on that account that Susie had not come. Tom had rather pictured, and led Boy to expect, tea in the large farm kitchen into which the porch-door led, with the big open fireplace and oak settle, and beams across the ceiling from which hung hams, and a rack with sides of bacon, and bunches of herbs done up in paper bags.

Of course, when he came to remember, it was only on very occasional, unceremonious visits that he was allowed to join the family party and take what the farmer called "pot luck" with them. Mrs. Day's self-respect obliged her on most occasions to spread tea in the best parlour, and to bring out the best china — with Sir Robert Peel portrayed on every cup and plate and jug and teapot, a relic of some

time of electioneering enthusiasm probably before the repeal of the corn-laws.

So if Tom had considered for a moment, he would have known that it was here that he and Boy would be quartered ; but there was something just a trifle depressing in the small attempts at modern smartness invading the solid respectability of the farmhouse best parlor, vestiges of the time when Mrs. Day had been Mrs. Bannister's own maid and did crochet work in moments of elegant leisure, and made painful caricatures of flowers with beads and wool. Mrs. Day looked with honest pride at these trophies of her former skill, and would lament—what some might have thought a subject for congratulation—that her right-hand had forgotten its ancient cunning, being more exercised of late years in butter-making and baking ; and certainly that comfortable and substantial member did not look as if it could be guilty of such fiddling sort of work as the antimacassar at one end of the solid, horse-hair sofa, which adhered to every coat or dress that came near it, and was consequently in constant peril of being carried off into the poultry-yard or pig-sty.

But it was certainly unjust of Tom to vent his little sore feeling of disappointment on that innocent work of art, which had had nothing whatever to do with the separation from Susie, and was not responsible for Boy's being tired and shy and disposed to quiver a little about the under-lip, a symptom which Tom rightly interpreted as produced by thoughts of mother,

being helped in this diagnosis by the fellow-feeling which had stirred powerfully within him as he looked across at the old hall.

Anyhow, he felt decidedly better when he had caught up the antimacassar from the slippery end of the sofa and crumpled it up into a ball and tossed it up on to the top of a corner cupboard, where Mrs. Day did not find it for ever so long, and mourned over the loss of this testimony to her youthful accomplishments.

First of all, this petulant performance made Boy laugh, and that was distinctly a relief, as the small face had been growing preternaturally serious, and Tom had sought in vain for the ghost of a joke to avert the catastrophe that was already trembling on the lip and brimming in the blue eyes.

And after that laugh Tom whipped Boy out of the heavy armchair which had engulfed him and established him on his knee, an article of furniture to which Boy was familiarly accustomed, and which had not been left behind at Corsham Street like Boy's high chair; and though there ensued some confusion over plates and cups, and, indeed, over morsels on forks on their way to mouths, the very confusion was amusing and made the young laugh ring out, mingling with a deeper one, and caused Mrs. Day, about her work in the kitchen, to stop and listen and laugh softly too.

The twilight was closing in before that merry tea was done, and the only light in the room was from the wood-fire, at whose big logs Boy gazed with wonder at their difference from the carefully husbanded

coal in London, and the bundles of fire-wood, and Tom gazed, too, with the memory of the open fireplace in the hall at Donnington.

How quiet it was ! how heavenly quiet ! Tom was listening to the silence with the appreciation that comes only to ears that have been deafened by " life's stunning tide " in London. A soft low of cows in the byre, a squeak from a pig disturbed by the pushing of a companion from its peaceful slumbers, a footstep of a hob-nailed boot on the brick path, and a pail set down with a clatter — each sound seemed only to draw attention to the silence that lapped it round, as if one said " Hark ! "

Boy had grown sleepy as he sat on Tom's knee in the big armchair ; and when Mrs. Day opened the door to see if Jenny might come and clear the tea away, Boy was sound asleep and Tom in dream-land too, though his eyes were open and shining in the red glow from the logs.

CHAPTER XIII

A MEET AT THE "HORSE-SHOES"

The dusky night rides down the sky,
And ushers in the morn,
The hounds all join in glorious cry,
The huntsman winds his horn.
Then a hunting we will go. — FIELDING.

WHAT a splendid morning ! with the sun shining in at the lattice window between the white dimity curtains.

Mrs. Day had been into the room once before, but could not find it in her heart to wake the two sleepers, though life in the farm had been on the move long before ; and it was not often, either in summer or winter, that the sun found any one in bed there when he was high enough to look in at the window.

" But Master Tom always were a lie-abed," Mrs. Day said as she looked down on them lying asleep in the big four-post bedstead ; " many's the time the master have come and routed him out of bed, and pretended to be terribly put about at his laziness. And now, I 'll wager, he 'd give something to have Master Tom's head on the pillow again in that room of his just off the squire's own ! Ain't they a picture, them two ? Why, if the squire were to ride by just

now I'd make bold to run out and fetch him in, and never mind what come of it. It would n't be in mortal man to turn away from such a pair!"

So Mrs. Day left them for another half-hour, and when she came creaking up the stairs again they were awake — you may be sure if Boy was, Tom was too — and Boy was standing on the patchwork cushion in the window-seat, looking 'out of the window and reporting to Tom what he could see, Fear? Homesickness? Quivering lip and filling eye? These were all gone and forgotten with the past night, and Boy was full of eager delight and interest.

Tom, too, lying in bed with his hands behind his head, and surveying Boy's curly head and short night-shirt and pink heels, had lost the keen sense of pain and disquiet at his parting with Susie, and the hungry longing for his own people that had crushed out all the pleasure of this return to the neighborhood of his childhood's home.

He was young enough yet to sleep away despondency, and to wake hopeful and eager for a day opening with a rosy, bright aurora and capable of endless possibilities of pleasure and enjoyment. It is in later years that sleep has the contrary effect, taking away any hallucinations we may have conjured up during the day, and that the dawn comes cold and gray, pointing a pitiless finger at the naked reality of life, stripped of all the little garnishings and disguises we have been at pains to trick it out with.

So Tom and Boy's dressing was a very cheerful

occasion ; and, with a little assistance from Mrs. Day, Boy's toilet was not of such an unconventional character as it was the evening he went to the post.

"I 'm a bit put about this morning," Mrs. Day explained apologetically, "along of that best parlor chimney smoking." Mrs. Day had contracted a good many of her husband's forms of speech, and only occasionally pulled herself up and reverted to the more elegant and refined way of talking that became a lady's-maid who had had places in the very first families. "It 's a way it has when I particular want to use the room, or the wind 's in the west. It 's churning day, too, when things generally goes a bit contrary. So I 've been wondering if you and Master Boy would mind taking your breakfast in the kitchen? The men 's all out of the way, and me and Jenny 's busy in the dairy, so you 'll have it all to yourselves."

Mind? Not a bit — it was just after Tom's, and, accordingly, after Boy's own heart ; and it looked delightfully snug with the little round table covered with a white cloth drawn up close to the hearth, sheltered from the draught by the great black oak settle, and the two big wooden armchairs placed ready — the seat of one elevated by a hassock and patchwork cushion to accommodate Boy.

Mrs. Day was frying the ham and eggs, with a most relishing savor, when Tom and Boy came down ; but when that was done and placed piping hot on the table, and the big black pot swung round again over the fire, Mrs. Day retired to the dairy,

from whence came the sounds of the clacketting of pattens on bricks and the slip-slap of making up butter and the swish of water.

Mrs. Day came in once in the course of breakfast with something held in her gathered-up apron, to show Boy a family of downy, yellow ducklings just hatched out of the egg, with little black buttons of eyes, and already looking as preternaturally wise and independent as if they had already explored the world and found it as empty as the shells they had just left.

Boy gazed at them in a fascinated and rather horrified way, while Tom and Mrs. Day exchanged cold-blooded remarks—the nature of which Boy happily did not understand—of a future occasion when they would appear in company with green peas.

"I'll send you a couple, Master Tom, that I will! They used to say as they did ought to be ready by the king's birthday, and that's the 4th of June, I take it; and our peas is always pretty forward if the birds will let 'em bide."

And then they were carried off to be put under a fussy brown hen, leaving Boy with a vision of the arrival on some future day at Corsham Street of two little yellow balls, who, he quickly decided, should sleep in his crib and share his bread and milk, not having yet realized how transitory is youth and yellow down, and how speedily come maturity and sage and onion.

After breakfast came a prolonged visit to the various birds and beasts about the farm. Tom, I

believe, enjoyed it quite as much as Boy, though the contemplation of a large family of young pigs and their mother palled on him sooner than it did on his son, who would have remained till further notice peering through the bars of the gate at their impudent gambols.

Tom felt more sympathy,—perhaps, with the thought of another mother bereft of her son—with a sweet-faced alderney with that blue light of motherhood in her big eyes, who gave long, yearning cries for a calf who had been taken away that morning in a cart driven, I am afraid, by a boy in a blue shirt; but that, happily, was a detail that did not add anything to the pang of the parting on either side.

There was the fierce old turkey-cock who gobbled and strutted, and the guinea-fowls who cried to Boy to “Go back! go back!” a warning he was quite disposed to take when the gander stretched out a long serpentine neck and hissed at him, and tall Cochin cocks, painfully on a level with his face, helped themselves unbidden to the bit of bread in his hand. It was rather a relief to Boy’s mind when they retired to a place of safety. The pigeons who came to partake of the crumbs Boy scattered for them outside the dairy door on the bricks, concealed their greediness and bowed and bridled with great politeness, and flew up with a whirr and flutter to the tiled roof when Boy clapped his hands—a performance which, it is needless to say, was repeated again and again, so exhilarating to the youthful mind is the feeling of inspiring fear without danger of retaliation.

It was fortunate that Boy was here when his father suddenly and unaccountably deserted him, for there is no knowing to what lengths Cochin cocks and ganders may proceed without a taller person to keep them in their proper places ; but when Boy turned round after putting the whole fan-tailed army to flight, his faithful henchman and boon companion had disappeared.

Boy's Tam-o'-Shanter had fallen off on the bricks, and his curls were all rough and tumbled, and his face rosy and bright as he clapped his hands and shouted ; and an old man riding by on a gray horse reined up and turned to look at him, and Boy shaded his blue eyes from the sun with a chubby hand and looked back at him.

Boy discovered his father a few minutes later in the armchair in the parlor, with his elbows on the table and his face in his hands. If it was really the beginning of a game of hide-and-seek, it was more serious than those which Boy and Tom played at in Corsham Street, and which caused the ladies in the drawing-rooms such indignation and wrath.

But there was a stir beginning outside — grooms riding by with led horses, and dogcarts bringing men to the meet, and groups of pedestrians bound for the same goal ; and then a couple of pink coats and white buckskins, and then the hounds with their tails bobbing along like clockwork, and the whippers-in cracking their long whips at some sleek white and black-and-tan body not exactly in the position expected of it.

If Tom Bannister was going to sit all the morning with his head in his hands he might just as well have stayed in Corsham Street, and all his plans and excitement at the prospect of the meet at the "Horse-shoes" were futile and thrown away.

The farmer had come in for a bite of something before the meet, and had brought in one or two friends for the same purpose — though it was not easy to find any one to hold the horses, as most of the farm lads had taken French leave or invented important business in the direction of the "Horse-shoes;" and the farmer, with the fellow-feeling which makes us wondrous kind, took no notice of a plough left at the end of a furrow, or a cart standing idle by the heap of mangolds, or a hoe lying prone that should have been busy among the weeds. Later on, too, he turned a deaf ear to voices giving the view halloo so lustily that should have been giving all their energy and strength of lungs to scaring the rooks from the new-sown corn.

The farmer and his friends in the kitchen were debating the chances of the day's sport, speculating on the probable greasiness of the banks and the heaviness of the plough-lands and the chances of the water being out in the low meadows by the stream — some of the drawbacks of hunting in February fill-dike; though the necessary ingredients for what is generally reckoned an ideal hunting day — a southerly wind and a cloudy sky — were not wanting, clouds having obscured the radiance of the sun that had peeped in at Tom in bed three hours earlier.

Anyhow, they all agreed that the scent was bound to be good — though scent is one of those things that the oldest and most experienced fox-hunter cannot fathom, mysteriously failing when circumstances seem most favorable, and asserting itself stoutly when everything is unpropitious ; so there is always the added delight of uncertainty as to what the day may bring forth, be it mild and moist, or bright and exhilarating with a touch of frost in the air.

Some of their talk penetrated even to Tom's ears, which had seemed sealed to everything but the memories of the days beyond recalling — by the sight of a face aged and altered since he saw it last, changed perhaps by vexing over the doings of a worthless son.

But even through a good thick stopping of trouble, a little sense of excitement will penetrate on a hunting morning to a mind that has once felt the intoxication of the chase, so Tom roused himself from his fit of the blues, and with Boy on his shoulder made his way through the farm orchard and paddocks to that snug corner hard by the village green in front of the "Horse-shoes," where a pollard oak stood in a rough little bit of covert, where he could stand and look on without observation from curious or recognizing eyes, and where Boy, perched on one of the boughs, could see all that went on in safety.

It is a pretty scene, and one that Tom had often pictured to himself. The hounds have already arrived and are seen clustering round the huntsman's horse, which stands patiently in the midst of them,

not even so much as raising a foot in remonstrance when the hounds brush against him or snuff at his heels, which they do as fearlessly as if such a thing as being kicked or trampled on by a horse was never heard of. The older ones, with their long, solemn faces, sit or lie gazing in front of them as if nothing, even the sight or scent of a fox, could disturb their equanimity, while some of the younger ones are a little inclined to wander, and have to be called to order by the whips.

There is a goodly gathering already, and, every minute, more join the throng, so many of the faces familiar to Tom that it is difficult to keep up a calm contemplation of the meet as merely a pretty lively scene, especially when the same gray horse and his rider who had passed the farm half an hour ago came up and joined a group of horsemen on the other side of the green.

There is the inevitable hunting parson, who is having a few words with the huntsman before the business of the day begins; a good number of gentlemen in pink, though, perhaps, the "rat-catcher get-up" preponderates; several ladies on more or less good-looking horses; the usual contingent of hard-riding young men on highly-bred horses, likely to override the hounds if the scent should be poor and the pace slow; several of those nondescript individuals who may be put down as dealers' men on young horses — the animals of all others feared by the huntsman, as more than likely to kick any unwary hound approaching too near; one or two boys on

ponies, though not so many as there would have been two or three weeks ago in the Christmas holidays; a small scattering of farmers on strong, short-legged nags, who most likely do good service in gigs on market-days, though, unhappily, in these hard times for tenant farmers, fewer of them can be seen in the hunting-field.

Vehicles of all sorts pour in — carriages and carts of every description, from the smartly turned-out wagonettes full of ladies to the chimney-sweep's donkey-cart overflowing with boys "all agog to dash through thick and thin." Some of these vehicles have only come to the meet, while others are prepared to follow the hounds wherever wheels can follow, and, perhaps, to penetrate into a good many places at considerable peril to the springs.

Then eleven strikes from the village church over there among the trees, and a new arrival is seen approaching. The hounds, who have hitherto shown no interest in any of the riders, dart forward to greet the new-comer, who rides up to speak to the huntsman — for this is the Master, and the only man except their own huntsman to whom the hounds deign to pay the least attention. He is on his weight-carrying bay hunter — one which Tom well remembers has carried him these ten seasons, and who knows nearly as much about hunting as his master, which is saying a good deal — and near him is a lady on a well-shaped black mare of unmistakable Irish breed, and evidently on terms of friendship with her mistress.

Tom remembers that mistress as a plucky little

rider on a chestnut pony, scrambling over hedges and ditches — a girl of fifteen, with a mane of dark hair down her back.

"How fond she used to be of that pony, Sandy!" Tom thought. "And it's plain she and the mare understand one another. She's got hold of a nice-looking animal, and no mistake!"

And Tom's appreciative glance noticed the mare's bright, well-opened eye — a sure sign of good temper — and her head of the shape that betokens intelligence. With that head and those shoulders she was easily picked out as an animal not likely to get her rider into a scrape, and if she should be in a difficulty would probably find her way out of it.

It was characteristic of Margaret Beresford that you should look first at the animal she rode before you noticed how she herself looked, and it was a course she would expect and thoroughly approve. Indeed, Tom hardly noticed more than that the little rough-haired, plucky child had grown into a slight, tall girl, with closely-plaited hair and an excellent seat on the black mare.

Two minutes' consultation between the authorities and the pack moves off along the road towards the first covert, followed by a motley crowd on foot, horseback, and wheels, leaving Tom gazing after them with longing eyes, grasping one of Boy's feet that swung from the bough above, where that young hero was perched.

"Come along down, youngster," said Tom with a sigh, "it's all over!"

CHAPTER XIV

THE MEETING

The end of all meeting, parting; the end of all striving,
peace.—FIONA MACLEOD.

I CANNOT give my readers an account of the run that day, for my special correspondent with the East Marlshire hounds saw no more of them, beyond a distant glimpse of the pack streaming away across the meadows in the direction of Postham, and a speck of scarlet here and there in the rear, for a fox had been found as usual in that covert on the hill-side above Birches Farm—a covert which had never been drawn blank within the memory of mortal man—and, as usual with the Birches hill foxes, proceeded to give his pursuers a fine run at a rattling good pace.

Once, an hour later, Tom heard the bell-like note of the hounds in full cry, a sound that works like magic on the ear of a fox-hunter; but he had seen too many familiar faces in the field, and those years of absence which had seemed so desperately long to him, and which he felt must have changed him past all casual recognition, had made so little alteration in some of his old friends that it made him chary of showing himself even as much as he had intended before leaving London.

So he resisted the temptation of following that alluring sound, though Mrs. Day offered to keep an eye on Boy, who had fallen into one of those delightful, sudden naps of childhood — anywhere, anyhow — which are unknown in later years, when sleep is a coy mistress needing most careful wooing, and being scared by the slightest disturbing circumstance.

But in the afternoon when he had taken Boy into the woods — where they found a few pale primroses growing in a sheltered nook — to a hill-top from whence a wide view of the country round could be obtained, he saw a few stragglers returning from the hunt, and Tom could guess who some of the wearers of the pink coats were from the direction in which they rode.

But neither of the riders turned in the direction of Donnington, so Tom reluctantly convinced himself that the rider of a certain iron-gray must have returned home earlier, and there was no chance of another glimpse of the broad shoulders that stooped more than of old, and of the gray head that was not carried now in the erect, masterful fashion Tom remembered.

"He didn't look up to a long run," Tom pondered ; "and I expect the running was a bit heavy across the plough, and he was always such a one to ride straight across country. I 'll be bound the mater or Ann was after him before he started to coax him to come home to lunch."

And then, with another long look at the old home, in the garden of which, he persuaded himself, he

could see moving objects — though at that distance it must have been the purest imagination — he turned to make his way back to the farm.

Some trifles caused him to take another way back. What trifles influence the whole course of life sometimes! And then Boy's desire to ride on a gate caused the delay of a few minutes, but for which a riderless horse coming trotting along the bridle-path across the big heathy meadow would have found his progress stopped by a closed gate, and no one to catch at the bridle on his neck.

An iron-gray, with that strange perplexity in its tender eyes that horses show when the guiding will no longer directs them, and an uncomfortable freedom is suddenly given them to go where and to do what they please ; and Tom always maintained that beyond this there was an appeal and concern in Quicksilver's look, and a consciousness of something unaccustomed and out of order, and a dumb wish for human help and sympathy in an emergency. Anyhow, it was not just a stupid, dull effort to make his way home to a comfortable stable and a good feed, for he might well have eluded Tom's startled grasp at the rein and gone on his way through the open gate at his own sweet will.

Tom recognized Quicksilver at a glance, and the next moment was sure there had been no accident as far as the horse was concerned. I believe he looked at the horse's knees in that second before he caught up Boy, and, with Quicksilver's rein over his arm, set off along the bridle-path as fast as he could go.

The horse had not been down ; perhaps the old man had dismounted and hitched the rein to a gate, from which it had slipped and the horse had set off home. There were plenty of hopeful surmises to explain the circumstances, and to crowd out and silence the haunting dread that underlaid them all. Oh ! if Quicksilver could have put into words the eloquence of his mild eyes ; but horses are such terribly dumb beasts — even in their own mortal agony they can hardly express their anguish.

Tom could not recall, when he looked back on this time, if Boy made any objection to the abrupt termination of his first experience of riding on a five-barred gate, or took any notice of the horse which, on another occasion, would have furnished such a fruitful subject for conversation, or asked where they were going when Tom set off on that hurried walk up the rough cart-track.

He could only remember Boy's arm clinging tight round his neck ; and I expect some of the agony of anxiety in the father communicated itself to the child, and silenced the little prattling tongue that had been talking away so gayly till now.

“There he is !” The haunting dread put to flight all the poor little hopes Tom had been conjuring up, at the first sight of that something lying prone by the side of the path, and laid a cold hand on Tom's heart and caught his breath with a gasp of fear.

A scarlet hunting-coat, and a gray head, from which the hat had fallen, resting on the outstretched arm, the hand of which still grasped the hunting-crop ; and

Quicksilver gave a little inquiring whinny as they came in sight of that still figure that looked so solitary lying there with the mists beginning to rise and gather as the short February afternoon drew to its close, and a rook (was it one of those whose noisy home was in the elms at the Hall?) flapped from a ragged thorn-tree hard by with a hoarse, deep caw, and winged its heavy flight away.

Tom fastened Quicksilver to that same thorn before he went to where the old squire lay, and set Boy tenderly down by the side of his grandfather.

There was a numb, dull kind of unreal feeling about him as if he were in a miserable dream, or as if it had all happened before and he had seen it all—the evening mist, the bare thorn-tree, the silent figure, and the gray head and handsome old face, on which, thank God! there was no disfigurement or marks of the accident that had ended the gallant old life—for that it was ended Tom never doubted for a moment.

I do not know how long he might have stood there with Boy holding his hand, and with that dread sense of irreparable loss, of irretrievable disaster, the sudden crushing of all the subtle, undefined hopes of reconciliation and return, the vitality of which he had not realized till he saw them lying dead with the dear old father. Too late! It had not been too late only a few hours ago when the squire rode past the farm. Merciful Heaven! Why was not some sign given to the poor fool, who hur-

ried out of sight, that it was the last chance of touching a living hand and hearing a word of forgiveness from living lips?

Involuntarily his hand tightened on the little hand in his clasp, and Boy gave a little half-frightened cry of "Daddy!" and then burst into a torrent of sobs, for daddy had pushed him suddenly and roughly away and was stooping over the prostrate form, and raising the gray head on his knee and loosing the collar.

Tom used to think he himself could hear Boy's voice at all sorts of unbelievable distances, but who would have thought that the little voice would have crossed the dark valley and called back the old grandfather out of the shadow?

Certain it was, there was a stir after that young voice, a quivering of the eyelids, a slight movement of the stretched-out hand.

"What a fool I was!" Tom told himself as the signs of returning consciousness showed themselves; "and what a fool I am too!" For the eyes, that had been so dry and hard in the desolation of a minute ago, kept brimming over and interfering with the sight of the dear old face, for a glimpse of which he had been hungering all these empty years. "Why couldn't I have seen that he was only stunned? Why, I might have stood there till doomsday, staring like a stuck pig, if it hadn't been for Boy.—Boy, you treasure, shut up and don't make such a hideous row! Don't you see that he's coming to himself as quick as he can come? And I

don't want him to see his grandson for the first time with such a very wide-open mouth. Oh, Boy ! we 're the luckiest beggars in all the wide world. 'For these and all his other mercies —' Come and see if you can get my pocket-handkerchief out of my pocket, like a man."

Naturally, Boy was puzzled by this extraordinary behavior of his father, especially by that reference to "other mercies," which was inseparably connected in his mind with meal-times and empty plates ; but it had the effect of stopping what Mary-Jane used to call his "owlings," though it was still a very April face, blurred with tears and quivering only half-consoled, on which the old man's eyes opened and brightened and smiled with an amused recognition, not, however, of the child seen a few hours ago in the farm garden, but of a child of more than twenty years ago who had been the apple of his eye and the pride of the old manor.

"Hullo !" The old lips faintly formed the words. "Hullo, Tom Thumb ! What's the matter with you?"

And then the eyes closed again, and when they reopened it was with the same pleased but not surprised recognition of Tom himself, as if twenty years might have flashed by while his eyes closed and changed the rosy, tear-stained child into the young man whose strong arm was holding up his father's head.

"Hullo, Tom !" he said. "I've had a bit of a spill, have n't I ?" And then, with the same instinct

which made Tom look at the horse's knees in that breathless second before he set off in search of his rider, he made an effort to raise his head and look round. "Where's Quicksilver?"

"All right, sir," Tom answered as coolly as if he and his father had only been parted in the course of the day's run. "Not a scratch about him; he's hitched on to the thorn there."

"I can't remember," the old man went on presently. "I was riding home after I left you down by the mill. Did you find a fox in the Bingley covert?"

"Not a ghost of one," said Tom positively, answering both for himself and the hunt, knowing those Bingley coverts of old.

"That's what I thought," said the squire, with a twinkle of satisfaction in his dim eyes. "I never knew these coverts worth drawing yet, though Sweatly is always so positive. And I promised Ann to come home early. But I can't remember how I came to grief."

"Rabbit-hole — eh?" suggested Tom.

"Well," admitted the squire reluctantly, "perhaps it was, and I wasn't minding what I was at. Serve me right for a careless old fool."

He was sitting up now, and Tom had found the flask in his saddle-pocket and had given him some brandy.

Every moment Tom expected that his father would realize the situation, and remember how long it was since they parted and the anger and the anguish that

had ensued ; and half feared the shock it might be to the old man, and half longed to have it over and to know how he stood with him.

But though the squire was manifestly recovering his strength, and at last, with Tom's help, got on to his feet and made his way, rather shaky and tottering to be sure, to where Quicksilver was fastened, he seemed still to take Tom's presence there as a matter of course, though a puzzled look came into his face now and then, and especially when he looked at Boy, who was standing solemnly important by Quicksilver's head holding the squire's hunting-crop. And Tom was aware of a furtive, inquiring look at him and the boy, as if the old man felt there was something he did not quite understand but did not want to betray the confusion in his mind.

"What have you done with your horse?" he said.
"Let me see — you were riding Harkaway, were n't you?"

"Not to-day." Tom was tightening Quicksilver's girths, and debating if it would be safe to let the squire ride home alone, and had made up his mind to follow at a distance to see him safe as far as the stable-yard.

But the question was solved for him, when, with considerable difficulty, the squire had mounted into the saddle.

"This spill of mine has made me a bit shaky. If you've sent your horse home, I'll get you to walk alongside and steady me a bit. There's the child

though, is n't there? I can't quite remember who—
But look here, Tom, you could put the youngster up
in front of me."

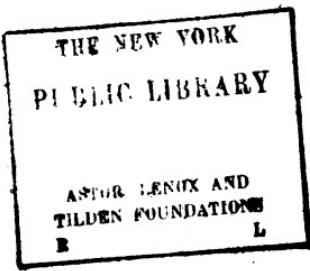
Tom glanced doubtfully at Boy; but this last twenty-four hours had made such a man of him that he allowed himself to be hoisted up in front of the squire, the terrors of the situation being alleviated by a firm grasp of his father's arm, which was over the horse's neck.

One of the old man's hands rested on Tom's shoulder while the other he held the young unknown grandson in front of him, and it was thus that Tom Bannister went home.



One of the old man's hands rested on Tom's shoulder.

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CHAPTER XV

GOING HOME

To meet worth living for;
Worth dying for, to meet;
To meet worth parting for;
Bitter forgot in sweet.—CHRISTINA ROSSETTI.

Tom had sometimes dreamed, waking or sleeping, of his return home, of kind or cold receptions, of stiffness and embarrassment or cordiality and warm welcome, of the greetings of old servants and the curiosity of new. He had pictured, too, Boy's advent, and the delight and admiration with which he would be received. There was never any coldness or stiffness or embarrassment in those imaginations of his when they were connected with Boy; and one favorite fancy was Boy mounted in front of the squire on his hunter, and the delight his grandfather would have in his pluck and spirit.

And this was, indeed, how Boy first passed the lodge gates at Donnington and went up the long elm avenue to the house. But Tom had no thought or heart for pride or satisfaction, so anxious was he to get the squire . . . , for the old man leant more and more heavily on his son's shoulder, and the words he spoke from time to time were strange and disjointed, . . . as Tom could make

them out, to times long past, which the squire spoke of as if they were of to-day or yesterday.

The mist was gathering and hanging in wreaths and straight lines over the meadows and the course of the stream. Already in the village as they passed through, the lights glimmered in the cottage windows, and warm fire-glow poured out hospitably from open doors on to the damp stones of the pathway ; and women peered out at the horse pacing by so slowly, and called to one another to know whoever it was. “ It ain’t never the squire, bless ye ! Why, he ’d a child put up befront of ‘un ! ”

All the familiar old scenes that Tom had pictured to himself over and over again, and which in his dreams of returning home he had always imagined himself welcoming and observing to the very smallest particular, now passed unnoticed ; and his only feeling as he went by the lodge was one of thankfulness that there was no delay but that a little girl ran out and opened the gate — he did not even spare a thought to wonder who she was. Nor did he consciously notice, though he remembered afterwards, the big gap in the avenue where one of the giant elms had given way before some winter tempest and had left a blank — ah me ! how suggestive of human life — that the small sapling put in its place could never fill, at any rate for this generation.

Home, without a glance up at the fine old front square and strong like the Bannisters themselves or at the mass of glossy ivy which has encroached on the gray weather-stained, lichen-touched stone since

the day when a schoolboy tossed his india-rubber ball to a girl leaning from that window to the right !

An undefined feeling of uneasiness and apprehension had pervaded the household at the Hall all the afternoon, and Ann had been more than once down to the lodge to see if her father were coming — though she scolded and laughed at Mrs. Bannister for being nervous. She would not hear, either, of tea being delayed or being anything but the usual pleasant, cosy gathering in the inner hall by the great open fireplace, with the big logs that Tom used to think of sometimes when he poked the skimpy fire in Corsham Street.

Sophy had just come back from a visit and was describing a ball she had been to, when Druid, the old retriever, roused from his sleep on the leopard-skin in front of the fire and listened, and the two fox-terriers, who had presumed on their master's absence to make themselves comfortable in his armchair, jumped down with shrill barkings and ran to the outer door which Milsom, the old butler, was opening.

A delay — an exclamation — a strange voice (was it a strange voice?) outside. The laughing reproof for being so late and not having kept faith with her died away on Ann's lips, and the welcoming smile on her mother's, and the next minute they were all in the outer hall at the open door, through which the damp mist was driving chill and cold, while up the broad stone steps Milsom and another were helping the squire, who walked feebly, leaning on a shoulder of each.

"All right," said Tom's voice. "Here we are, sir; another step. We've had a bit of a spill, that's all; nothing ~~much~~ to signify, and no bones broken."

And so Tom passed in at the old home door and met mother and sisters without a word of greeting or explanation, his first thought being to get the squire safely home, and his next to keep the shock and terror from his mother.

I do not quite know, nor did Ann, how Boy came into her arms — nor did Boy either, or I think he might have objected to being out of reach of his father. Ann's slight arms were hardly strong enough to carry such a solid little person; but dynamics are altogether foolishness when love is the force to be reckoned, and Ann's love for Tom would have made a very Atlas of her to carry the whole world for his sake.

It was only by and by, when the squire was sitting in his armchair by the fire, looking pretty much as usual and joining in now and then while Tom gave an account of his fall — dwelling on that rabbit-hole theory of its cause, which he had himself grown less and less to believe in during that slow, anxious journey home — it was then that inquiring looks and half-spoken questions from the sisters reminded Tom how unaccountable his presence there must seem to them.

Mrs. Bannister had, I think, no room in her mind for wonder, so full was it of the old husband whose cold hand she was clasping so tenderly between hers. But Tom held up a warning hand to postpone ex-

planations to another time ; and the next minute the squire spoke of Harkaway, Tom's old hunter, sold more than four years ago, and Tom answered as if he might have been riding him only an hour ago.

" I 'll go and see if they 've given him a mash, and have a look at Quicksilver, too," he said. And crossing to the tea-table, where Boy was being plied with sponge-cake and bread and butter, he took him out of Ann's arms and carried him to the door.

He stopped there for a minute and took a long look round, lingering longest on the old figure in the hunting coat leaning back in the big armchair, with Druid's black head on his knee, and on the mother close to the squire's side, bending forward with that look of entire absorption that could not spare a glance for the prodigal son.

Sophy was kneeling in front of her father, holding a cup of tea ready for him ; and Ruth was standing, slim and tall, by the fireplace, watching with big anxious eyes that were beginning to realize the truth.

Only Ann's eyes followed Tom and Boy as they went, and when he was out in the passage leading to the kitchen he heard her quick step after him.

" Tom, he is very ill ? "

" I 'm afraid so."

" Where are you going ? "

" Away, Ann."

" Don't ! "

" Had n't I better go before he realizes about my being here ? "

"Won't he remember?"

"I don't think so — if he does not see me again."

"But it will be so dreadful for you to leave him like this."

"Yes. I think I'll stop about till the doctor has been. I told Milsom to send off at once for him."

"And the boy, Tom? Your boy!"

"Yes; he's a fine little chap, is n't he? I shall like to think that he rode on the pater's hunter just once.—Hullo! there's the bell!"

"Ann," called Sophy's voice from the door, "father thinks he'd like to go up to his room, and he wants Tom to help him."

So Tom's intentions of leaving were prevented, and when the doctor arrived, half an hour later, he found Tom sitting by the sofa in the squire's bedroom as if he were the most natural person in the world to be there, and, after a quick glance from father to son, Dr. Brand asked no questions but accepted the situation, only attributing the old squire's illness in great part to the agitation of a reconciliation — which, as we know, was not the case.

Boy was becoming by this time hardened to the vicissitudes of life, and accepted with composure the homage paid to him in the housekeeper's room; and it was only when bed-time came, and Mrs. Partridge, the housekeeper, showed him a cot, which had been hastily unearthed from the lumber-room and put up by the side of her bed, that the feeling of utter desolation overwhelmed him, and no one could comfort him.

The sound of his bewailing reached Tom, who was sitting at dinner with his sisters, though I do not think any one else would have detected it.

"I don't think I'll come down to dinner," the squire said when the gong sounded, "I feel a bit stiff after my tumble. But you go, Tom; and you too, my dear," to his wife. "Oh, nonsense! I shall be all right. I dare say I shall get a nap while you're gone. There, Tom, take your mother down, and see that she makes a good dinner."

So Tom, to pacify him, took his mother down, leaving the maid on guard in the adjoining dressing-room.

The soft old hand, with the blue veins showing on the ivory skin, resting on Tom's arm, gave him a thrill, though he felt an odd little vexation that that arm was in his morning coat and the sleeve worn and threadbare.

Now he should be alone with his mother, and she would take his head between her hands as she used in old days, and kiss him softly on the forehead and eyes — those light, rose-leaf kisses of hers that he remembered from a child.

But no! Though she paused at the top of the oak staircase, it was only to say, "Dr. Brand does not think very seriously of the case, Tom. He thought we were needlessly anxious, did n't he?"

She could think of nothing but the old Tom Bannister — her sweetheart, her young husband, the father of her children, her lover, her friend all these years "till death us do part." There is no room for

any other thought when the parting is looming dark and near.

So mother and son went on down the staircase to the dining-room, and Tom took his old place at the end of the table, it having been a tradition since their early married days that the squire and his wife should sit together at the side.

As to seeing that his mother made a good dinner, that was simply out of the question — there was no keeping her after the soup had been served ; so Tom and his sisters were left alone to finish their meal, only prevented by the servants' presence from confidential conversation.

It was towards the end of dinner that Boy's crying reached his father's ears, and, with an apology to his sisters, he left the table and followed the forlorn young voice to its source — a half-undressed, sobbing little person, resisting all Mrs. Partridge's blandishments with kicking and struggling.

Tom pacified Mrs. Partridge's outraged feelings as best he could (Boy's were pacified directly he had a good firm grip of his father's coat collar), and suggested that the cot should be moved into his room ; and though Boy was desperately sleepy and could hardly keep his eyes open, even for the indignant glances that wounded Mrs. Partridge so deeply, he would not consent to be put into bed, so Tom had to wrap him up in a big shawl and take him down to the dining-room. Here, after a few minutes' drowsy enjoyment of biscuits and grapes, he fell fast asleep in Tom's arms, only rousing to a

closer hold on that beloved old coat when any attempt was made to transfer him to the arms of either of the three adoring aunts, who would have esteemed it a high honor to hold his sleeping majesty.

It was then that Tom had the first chance of talking to his sisters, and they drew up their chairs round the dining-room fire — for on such occasions it is almost a relief to do something unusual, and in the big drawing-room, with the lights and flowers and great, generous fire, there was too painful a sense of the emptiness of the big armchair, with the London papers and the shaded reading-lamp put ready on the little table at the side.

Ann soon slipped away to her father's room, but she came down again presently to say that he was asking for Tom.

It was such a strange mixture of additional anxiety and consolation, this entire oblivion of all the poignant feelings of the last four years. It showed there was something terribly wrong; and yet what a comfort that Tom could so quietly take his place again in the family circle, and just now especially when they wanted his help and support most, without the storm of agitation and painful explanation that they all felt must precede such a return, and they looked at one another with half-frightened, half-glad eyes as Tom rose up to obey the summons.

Boy was sound enough by this time to be safely deposited in the cot moved into Tom's old room, next to the squire's own, and he was to be relied on to sleep peacefully all night without disturbing

next-door neighbors with crying — even if the substantial old Queen Ann walls would have allowed the passage of such disturbance.

The squire was in bed and looked so like himself and glanced round as the door opened with such a bright, alert look that Tom hesitated for a moment lest sudden recollection and agitation might counteract the apparent improvement in the invalid.

"Come on, lad," said the squire. "I want you to read a bit of the paper as you did last night; and your mother's tired."

CHAPTER XVI

TWILIGHT AND EVENING STAR

Oh Hesperus! thou bringest all good things —
 Whate'er of peace about our hearthstone clings,
 Whate'er our household gods protect of dear
 Are gather'd round us by thy look of rest. — BYRON.

THOSE were strange days that followed Tom's home-coming — days, to be sure, full of the dark cloud of trouble and anxiety, but with wonderful gleams of the sunlight of hope and the soft rainbow of comfort, which abide in the memory long after the pain has grown dull and disappeared. So that, looking back on them, Tom sometimes thought they were among the happiest of his life.

"I must go in the morning," he had said to Ann as he bid her good-night outside his father's room.

But in the morning a groom carried a telegram to Postham, directed to Mrs. Bannister, 35 Corsham Street, containing these words : "Boy quite well, but my father ill, and we are at Donnington. Shall not be home till Monday. Will write.—Tom."

But when he sat down that evening to write to Susie, it was becoming very plain to him that his return must be indefinitely postponed.

"I could n't leave him now," he said to himself; "and they all want me so. I could n't go away

when they need me most. Susie will understand that, I 'm sure ; she will understand," he told himself peremptorily as the picture of a childish, pouting, unreasonable face formed before his mental vision. "She will quite understand how impossible it would be to leave them all just now," he maintained sturdily, just as the mother of Sisera listened eagerly to the flattering assurances of her wise women — yea, she made answer to herself to silence the dread foreboding that must have been whispering in her ears.

If it only had not been for the worrying thought of poor little Susie, moping alone in Corsham Street, there was much that would have given Tom infinite pleasure. The mere fact of being at home again, to wake up in the morning in his old room, just the same as when he slept there as a boy, with his book-shelves containing prizes won at school and well-thumbed volumes of adventure and stirring romance. There was the bat he had wielded with distinction on some well-fought cricket fields ; there was the fishing-rod that had been a birthday present when he was a lad of twelve ; there were two foxes' brushes, trophies of runs of which he could recall every incident even now.

As he lay in bed and looked at these and ever so many other precious possessions of his boyish days, all the past rose up so vividly and really before his mind's eye that he could almost have fancied himself a boy again if it had not been for the apple cheek and the curly head on the pillow of the crib close at hand.

Then the fact of being at home again just when he was so desperately wanted, was an ever-present source of gratification. He had thought, sometimes, of trouble or illness befalling in the dear, sheltered old home and he inexorably cut off from that most blessed birthright of being a help and a support—that was the part of his birthright the loss of which he felt most acutely; and to take this rightful place so easily, and find them all turning to him as if he had never been away, proving that no one else had usurped the place of right-hand to father or mother or sisters, and that they had not grown so self-dependent as not to need him. Indeed, it was a little bit bewildering at first the way in which all questions from household, stables, and farm were referred to him, till he had gathered up the threads that had dropped out of his hands during those four years of absence.

Then there was the delight of seeing Boy in the old home. Boy, with that wonderful adaptability of childhood, soon made himself perfectly at home, and accepted all the comfort and luxury of his surroundings as if he had been to the manner born, and as if the narrowness and squalor of Corsham Street were things altogether beyond his ken; he graciously accepted, too, the homage of his aunts, and the adoration of the housekeeper's room and servants' hall and stable-yard. Tom had glimpses of him from time to time—at one time searching for violets with Ann under the terrace wall, and at others playing ball with Ruth in the hall or horses

with Sophy up and down the long corridor, the child's presence helping to lighten the heavy load of anxiety that would otherwise have settled so darkly on the house.

Tom saw him, too, following Mrs. Partridge to the store-room and superintending very actively the giving out of stores, from which occupation he emerged very sticky and smeared. The next view of him was with Milsom, and armed with very clanking keys, on the way to the cellar; but discretion induced him to stop at the cellar steps, which were dark and suggestive of bogys, and to turn aside into the pantry, where William was cleaning the plate and manifestly required assistance.

Of what happened in the kitchen and dairy Tom was not eye-witness, and only received somewhat indistinct accounts from Boy himself, but these were enough to induce him to send urgent messages to the cook to be more sparing in the matter of cakes and jam-tarts.

He had another glimpse of him, riding round and round the stable-yard on one of the hunters led by a groom, while a group of stablemen looked on in admiration. He had his hand on the window to open and shout to them to be careful of the child, but checked himself.

"What an old woman I 'm getting. I won't spoil sport with Boy's one chance of a ride!"

These were only glimpses of Boy's triumphant career, for Tom was mainly occupied with his father, who could hardly bear him out of his sight.

"I had better go," Tom had said, "before he realizes about my having been away."

But the squire never did realize it. Now and then a puzzled look would come into his face, but it was only for a minute, and it passed away leaving the placid satisfaction in Tom's presence that was at once the comfort and anguish of those last few days. For they were the last days, and they were not many.

There was no suffering, no trouble of mind or body, only a very gradual loss of strength—so gradual that it was almost imperceptible to the watchers in the pleasant, sunny room unless they compared what he did with an effort to-day with what he had done easily two days before.

He never came downstairs again, and each day sat up for a shorter time in his armchair, till at last it was not worth while to undergo the fatigue of even the partial dressing, which had not been realized as a fatigue at all the first day he was ill, and he lay in bed, with Mrs. Bannister in the big dimity-covered armchair at the side, where old hands could meet which had been young when "the man with his right-hand took the woman by her right-hand"—though even then they had spoken of the parting.

He liked Tom to sit near the foot of the bed where he could see him when he opened his eyes, for he dozed a good deal off and on, and he would smile and give a little satisfied nod when Tom was there and look round inquiringly if he were absent.

Those February days often came back to Tom's memory in after times—the quiet room with the

ashes falling with a tinkle from the grate, the soft February sunshine coming in on to the dressing-table, the big bunch of violets Ann and Boy had found, the sound of young lambs in the folds at the home-farm, and the soft notes of the birds beginning to think of their love-songs.

Other sounds sometimes penetrated the silence of the sick-room, sounds that brought a smile to Tom's lips, while it caused him to look quickly at the bed to see if such unaccustomed sounds as a child's footsteps along the passage or a gay little voice shouting in the garden would disturb the patient or raise questions or confusion in the placid mind. But though the squire evidently heard, it did not seem to disturb or puzzle him ; and once, when Tom had been called down to see the bailiff, he found on his return that Boy had followed Druid into the room and was standing by the bedside.

Druid spent most of the day on the mat outside the door, and now and then made his way in and startled the old hand that lay on the counterpane by the touch of a sympathetic, damp nose.

On this occasion Mrs. Bannister was not there either, so no one was present to give an account of the interview ; but it had evidently been of a very friendly character, for Boy was showing some treasures he had in his pocket and had set out a very incongruous array on the bed for his grandfather's inspection, and was showing the old man how Milsom drew corks out of bottles, one of the treasures being a champagne cork.

After this Boy found his way several times to the sick-room, and would have come oftener only Tom fancied that his presence disquieted his mother, proving as it did the failing of the mind that seemed to have lost all sense of wonder or curiosity. It disquieted others besides Mrs. Bannister, for that evening when Tom came to bed he found Ann waiting for him by his bedroom fire, near the crib where Boy was peacefully sleeping. It was nothing new to find her there, for Ann generally kept guard — quite unnecessarily, ungrateful Tom assured her — over Boy's slumbers till his father came up to bed. But now she had evidently something she wanted to say of especial importance.

She looked so slim and girlish in her blue dressing-gown, with her hair in a long silken plait down her back, recalling the days when a teasing small boy used to make use of it for purposes of annoyance. But her face was full of very serious and earnest thought, and there was a shine of recent tears in her eyes.

"Tom," she said, "Sophy and Ruth and I have been talking."

"Well, Sister Ann," he said with a little effort at a joke, "that is n't a very unusual occurrence, is it?"

But she waved away the pitiful attempt at fun with a little appealing movement of her hand.

"He is very ill, Tom."

"Yes, dear."

"He will never be any better."

"No."

"But he does n't know it."

"No ; why should he ? I was thinking this very evening as I sat there—don't you remember?—'and may there be no sadness of farewell when I embark.'"

Then silence for a bit, and some drops fell on Boy's curly head as Ann arranged the bedclothes.

"But, Tom, he ought to know," Ann went on when voices were more under command. "The rector was here to-day, and I think he tried to tell him. Oh ! he cried so, poor old man, when he came out of father's room. They were at school and Oxford together, you know, Tom, and have always been such friends."

Tom nodded. "I don't think we need trouble about his not knowing."

"But it is on your account, Tom, and Boy's, as well as father's. And Sophy and Ruth quite agree. It ought to be set right—about the property, I mean. And we agreed that Mr. Sargent ought to be sent for as soon as possible."

"What could he do?"

"Why, he could alter the will or make another. You know, Tom, when father was so vexed with you he made a will leaving all except what mother and we were to have to Donald."

"Yes, I know. He was quite right. I knew what to expect, and I acted with my eyes open."

"We did all we could, and so did mother."

"Yes, I 'm sure you did. But it 's no use crying over spilt milk. Donald will make an excellent

squire of Donnington. He's a downright good fellow ; he wrote to me at the time and said how sorry he was, and that he had done all he could to dissuade my father from his intention."

"Yes," said Ann, with a little stiffening of the line of her gentle mouth. It was not so easy to appreciate the virtues of a man who had usurped Tom's birthright ; I do not fancy that with all his merits Jacob could have been very popular in the paternal tents. Ann remembered a strained and uncomfortable visit of Donald and his young wife to Donnington, when they had tried to be cordial and kind under the squire's watchful and irritable eye, keen to notice any coldness or reserve.

"You must n't think for a minute, Ann," Tom went on, "that I regret my marriage. I have the best and dearest little wife in the world ; and as for Boy — well, you see what he is. I would act just the same to-morrow, if it all came over again, without the least hesitation. The one thing I am sorry for is that it should have vexed and displeased my father so ; but I think he was quite right to leave his property as he pleased, and there was no injustice or hardness about it. I have no reason either to think that if he really remembered what had happened, he would be inclined to make any alteration ; and if Mr. Sargent comes I shall tell him that I don't consider my father is in a fit state to make any alterations in the disposition of his property. Don't look so sad about it, dear little Ann. It is a most wonderful and blessed bit of luck that I am

able to be here just now; and Donald is welcome to the estates twice over, as long as I can be with the old father and all of you just as if nothing had happened."

They stood a few minutes in silence by the fire, and then Ann turned to the crib.

"It's not only on your account, Tom," she said, "but there's Boy. It seems such a dreadful pity!"

"Yes," said Tom with a little regretful sigh. "It does seem a pity. He would have made a fine little squire of Donnington."

CHAPTER XVII

PARTING

Together once, but never more
While Time and Death run out their runs,
Though sundered now as shore from shore —
Together once. — CHRISTINA ROSSETTI.

IT was ten days after Tom's return home that the old squire went. The sinking had been so gradual that those constantly with him hardly recognized the change in him, and when the end came it took them by surprise — as the end always does, because the illness preceding it never so prolonged.

It was in the evening when the "one clear call" for the old squire came. Boy had been a little fractious over his undressing, and Tom had been summoned to decide some small matter in debate, and on a sudden impulse had picked Boy up in his little night-shirt and carried him into the squire's room, and sat down on the side of the bed and took one of the old hands that were a little chill, he noticed, though he did not realize from what cause, and laid it on Boy's curly head.

"He has come to say good-night to you, sir," Tom said.

The old man opened his eyes, drowsy with the

coming of the great sleep, and looked at the two. "Good-night," he murmured indistinctly, "God bless you, Tom, and Tom's boy."

These were almost the last intelligible words he spoke, for when Tom came back, after putting Boy into bed, he saw a change had come; and the doctor, who had come in for his evening visit, made a sign to Tom that the end would not be long in coming.

But in those last minutes Tom was not needed, for the frail old mother set him aside and took her rightful place at her husband's side—her arm might be old and weak, but it was strong enough to support the dying head, and the love that is stronger than death could keep down the overpowering waters of grief as long as voice or look or touch could sooth or reach the soul that was departing.

So Tom and his three sisters stood at the foot of the bed, and round the door clustered a group of sorrow-stricken servants, some of whom had to make desperate rushes out of earshot when sobs became irrepressible. Among them Tom remembered afterwards to have seen faces from the stable-yard and farm, out-of-doors, open-air faces that looked strange and unaccustomed inside the Hall, and who even in that solemn presence and in the midst of sincere and heart-felt sorrow for the old master, could not resist curious and admiring looks round at what appeared to them the splendor of the spacious, old-fashioned room.

It all seemed a kind of dream to Tom as he stood

listening to the labored breathing and watching the dear face supported on his mother's arm.

There was that strange effect of loneliness about the dying man, though all he loved best were gathered round him; and Tom's heart yearned after that solitary wayfarer into the Valley of the Shadow, as the children of Israel may have done when "the people stood afar off and Moses drew near unto the thick darkness where God was."

"Mother wants to see you, Tom."

It was next morning, and Tom had slept in that exhausted sleep of sorrow through many attempts of Boy to wake him, and through Milsom's preparation for his bath.

Boy had been allured away to be dressed and made much of by the servants, being blissfully unconscious why he should not roll his ball along the corridor as he went down, or call a cheerful good-morning at the top of his fresh young voice from the top of the stairs to Milsom in the hall.

Tom might have gone on sleeping indefinitely if Ann's voice had not roused him, and her words, with that name of mother to conjure by, had not brought him out of bed, half-dazed with sleep, and only half recalling the events of the previous day.

"She is in my room," Ann went on, with the little shake in her voice that marked this change in the dear old order. "She wants to see you and Boy as soon as you are dressed."

"All right," said Tom, "I sha'n't be long."

His heart was full of Susie as he dressed. He

would have liked to have had a little bit of comforting all to himself from some one who was outside the circle of grief, and who would only feel the sorrow on his account. He would have liked to be a little miserable, and Susie had a petting, coaxing way with her sometimes that was very consoling. There may have been a little spice of selfishness in his feeling, but it was very transitory, for by the time he had finished shaving he was thinking most of his sisters, on whom the heavy blow had fallen, and of the mother whose loss outweighed all theirs put together.

Every day he had written long letters to Susie, regular love-letters full of all the fond nonsense that he knew would please her, and full, too, of Boy and all his doings and sayings, and some of the pretty things that people said of him—things he would not have mentioned to any one but Susie ; for was not Boy hers and his alone?—so they could afford with one another to put aside all pretence and be as foolish and vain over him as they pleased.

But Susie had never answered his letters. For the first day or two Tom had looked at the post-bag as it was opened and its contents distributed, fearing it might bring a letter of reproaches and entreaties to return. It was almost a relief to receive nothing ; and it was easy to account for her silence, for Susie was not good at writing and was very sensitive about any criticism on that or her spelling, which was not always quite orthodox. He could quite fancy her imagining that he would allow his sisters —whom she

persisted in thinking fine ladies and censorious — to read and make fun of them.

"Silly little girl," he said, "she will know better soon."

Even before their marriage he had not had any letters from her, and he could well believe now, when, perhaps, she was feeling a little bit touchy and sore with him, she would not make the effort; for to those unaccustomed to letter writing it is a great effort to put pen to paper and to find words to write.

So Susie's silence did not disquiet him very greatly, and only made his letters to her longer and more affectionate, as he pictured her loneliness in the dull little rooms at Corsham Street — the dulness unrelieved by any occupation, and the days principally spent in looking out of the window or into the fire, or watching the hands of the cheap little American clock as it ticked out the tiresome minutes one after another. Poor little Susie! Well, it would not be long now before he was back again with her. He could not bring himself to say *home* again, though home centres round the best beloved in the most unpromising situations; and Susie was his best beloved beyond all gainsaying. But home still meant his boyhood's home to him, and seeing Boy in the old scenes strengthened and revived this feeling.

If only Susie could have known Donnington as home! But Tom had to pull himself up short whenever he came to this, and force himself to think of good, old honest Donald the master of the old

home, doing the duties of his situation so conscientiously and laboriously with that sort of excellence that is so little appreciated.

"It's rough on him," said the disinherited with quite genuine pity, as he thought of all the disagreeables in store for his cousin from the old servants and retainers, who would think they showed their loyalty to Tom by flouting his supplanter. "I'll do all I can for Donald. It's a bit awkward for him my being here, but I think I can put things straight for him with some of the tenants; and he'll soon see there has been no tampering with the pater's will. Poor little Ann! Why, if she and the others had had their way and we'd sent for Sargent and tried to get things altered, what a cur I should have felt when Donald came! And much good it would have been. But bless their dear little hearts all the same! I believe it was quite as much for Boy's sake as for mine. 'Such a dreadful pity!' said Ann. Well, so it is; and Donald has no boys, they say."

But by this time he was dressed and made his way to Ann's room, first involuntarily going to seek his mother in the accustomed room where the calm majesty of Death lay but where his father was not.

He stopped for a minute at the door of Ann's room trying to nerve himself for the work of consolation, realizing the infinite grief such a bereavement must be — thinking what it would be to lose Susie, though theirs had been but four years' union and his parents' fifty.

And then he knocked and was bidden enter. And then some one came quickly across the room and folded loving arms round him, and drew him down to kneel before her where she sat in the old nursery rocking-chair, and drew his face to her breast and showered soft kisses on his forehead and eyes.

Comfort his mother? Why, he was crying like a schoolboy or a baby, with his head in her lap, and she was comforting him "as one whom his mother comforteth." And yet I think Tom did comfort her more effectually by his sobs and shaking shoulders than by the most beautifully chosen words, and that the feeling of his head against her breast did much to soothe the aching emptiness of the widowed heart.

It seemed as if it were only now she had been able to realize his return. Her heart had been so entirely filled and occupied with her husband, and she had accepted Tom's presence almost with as little wonder or curiosity as to how it had come about as the squire himself, and had not troubled to ask how or why, just taking it for granted that at the time of need Tom was there.

But now, in that awful leisure after a death when the hurrying anguish of life seems to pause for a moment, she had time to remember she was a mother; for that is how most good women feel—wife first, mother second, self a very poor third.

Ruth had been faint and hysterical in the night. Ann—little tender-hearted, sympathetic Ann, who

generally felt her sister's smallest aches with unnecessary acuteness, was quite angry and indignant with her, and would have liked to try drastic, uncomfortable remedies — pumping cold water on her or shaking her — and certainly would have kept all knowledge of such despicable weakness out of sight of their mother, who should be sheltered and protected in a sort of sanctuary of grief.

But Mrs. Bannister set all Ann's little arts and solicitudes aside, and laid Ruth on the cushions prepared for her own comfort, and soothed and comforted her as if the sorrow fell especially hard on her.

And in the morning, when Ann was hoping her mother was sleeping at last and would not stir for fear of waking her, knowing how bad the first waking would be, a quiet, wakeful voice spoke from the shadow of the bed-curtains.

"Are you awake yet, Ann? I want to see Tom, my poor boy. I hardly spoke to him last night. He will feel this so terribly! No, don't call him; it's better for him to sleep. He was looking very fagged last night. And the little boy, I want to see him too. Do you know, it seems so strange I hardly seem to have looked at Tom's boy yet, though of course I've seen him about with you; and I've been thinking so much about him to-night. Did n't I hear one of you say he was like his grandfather?"

And so as the gray morning light crept into the room, the two talked of Boy and of his doings and sayings; and Ruth, stealing into the room, very

penitent and remorseful for her ill-behavior the night before, was quite surprised to hear cheerful talking, and even a little laugh from the grandmother at some funny little remark of the small grandson.

CHAPTER XVIII

DONALD

The old order changeth, giving place to new.—TENNYSON.

“**I** WILL run up to London and see Susie, even if it is only for a couple of hours,” Tom had promised himself as he dressed that morning; but if it had been impossible to leave a dying father, it seemed almost more so to leave a bereaved mother, especially as every one turned to him for orders and all the arrangements devolved upon him.

“I’m in a most anomalous position,” he said to Mr. Sargent, the kind old lawyer and family friend, who, Tom knew, had done all that lay in his power to set matters straight between his father and himself, and who had written a kindly letter of advice to the headstrong young fellow, who would not be advised. “I don’t want to make Donald’s position any the more uncomfortable, and yet it’s so natural for all these good souls to turn to me for directions and orders just as if I was my father’s heir as well as his son. I can’t say to old Milsom ‘You must wait and ask your new master,’ more especially as I suspect the old fool of an intention of declining the new master and leaving Donnington, which would just be the death of him after thirty years’ service; and

then there's Jones consulting me about the horses, and he knows as well as I do that Donald hardly knows a horse from a cow. And so here I go settling this, that, and the other ; and if I were in Donald's place I should say, 'Confound his impudence ! interfering in my concerns ! ' "

" He 's not likely to think anything of the sort," said the lawyer.

" No, poor old Donald ; he 's not like me. I telegraphed to him at once, and I expect he 'll be here this evening, and then I can turn them all over to him. You 'll make it all plain to him —won't you ? —that I don't contest his rights for a single minute, and that every blessed thing here that is not my mother's is his, and I 'm only just a visitor in the old place and — and chief mourner. No one can deprive me of that, anyhow."

" Oh, Master Tom," said the old friend sadly, " why did n't you come home sooner ? "

" Why, man alive ! " protested Tom stoutly, " did n't I come exactly and wonderfully at the very nick of time ? Only to think that I might so easily have come too late is enough to make one grateful to the end of one's life. Anyhow, I 'm his son, and so it *is* my business to make the arrangements for the funeral and for my mother and sisters."

To his mother, too, Tom had to maintain more sometimes than he really felt of contentment and resignation.

" Dear," he would say, stroking the anxious old hand laid on his sleeve and smiling into the eyes

that were so full of pitiful love for him, "think what a blessed memory this last week will always be, and this quiet time with you too. 'Bless Tom and Tom's boy;' and he would have said Tom's Susie too, if he could only have seen her."

"Tell me about her, Tom?"

And Tom would tell over and over again how sweet Susie was, and how pretty and gentle and how fond of him and Boy. There was not much variety in these descriptions of Susie, but there was not much variety in Susie herself when all her qualities were reckoned up. Perhaps the most lovable people are those who cannot be dissected or have their separate graces and virtues labelled and catalogued.

"You will bring her to see me some day, Tom, won't you? We shall not be separated again for long together, and you'll spare Boy sometimes to cheer us up? When we are settled at Elmhurst — Now, Tom, don't look like that! Of course we shall move to Elmhurst. Your father and I always talked of that, years ago, before there was any thought of the property going to Donald. It would have been just the same if you had had Donnington — I should have moved to Elmhurst; so it's nothing to do with you or what happened. Your father and I always agreed if he went first it would be better for me to move away. His mother did, you know, Tom, and I thought it was good and wise of her to do so, for though I always got on well with your grandmother I should never have felt

as if Donnington were mine as long as she lived here.—Oh, Tom, you foolish boy, what are you crying for?"

For Tom was realizing that the loss was not his alone to be bravely borne and made light of, but fell also on his mother and sisters, whose home could no longer be at Donnington when the new squire took his place there, however considerate and kind he might be.

That is one of life's heaviest trials, finding how the results of our actions affect others when we would so gladly bear them all ourselves.

So for Tom's sake Mrs. Bannister talked of the move to Elmhurst almost cheerfully, and pictured Tom bringing Susie and Boy there; and Tom, to please her, tried to do the same and stifle the bitter, resentful feeling—resentment against himself more than any one else that rose within him when he thought of it.

He could picture to himself with equanimity Donald Bannister as the master of Donnington; but the idea of Mrs. Donald as the mistress, instead of his dainty, gentle old mother with her old-fashioned courtesy and little stately ways, was unendurable to him.

Donald Bannister arrived that evening nervous and, perhaps, a little bit suspicious of this prodigal son, who received him with such unaffected cordiality and who had returned in such a very unaccountable and opportune manner, and who appeared so easily and happily at home, surrounded by a loyal body-

guard of old servants, who eyed the new-comer with anything but favor.

Donald was one of those sensitive, self-conscious men who are always on the lookout for dislike and depreciation in others, an attitude that rather invites what they expect. He was too anxious to be liked and thought well of, and had not learnt the secret that the surest way to win liking is to like, and to be thought well of is to think well of others — a way in which it may truly be said that with what measure we mete it shall be measured to us again.

He was of poor outward physique, too, and was painfully conscious what a much finer-looking fellow this Tom Bannister was who came out to meet him on the steps at Donnington, and walked by his side into the house ; and he fancied he could read the unfavorable comparison in the eyes of the men-servants, who otherwise behaved with such irreproachable civility. Why, the very dogs sniffed contemptuously at Donald's somewhat spindly legs, and jumped up on Tom with boisterous affection checked in a moment by a sign or a word.

Tom's very cordiality and friendliness made Donald suspect that the prodigal son had been reinstated, and that he and Mr. Sargent were preparing to break to him the intelligence that the inheritance — which he had neither desired nor expected, and had even protested against in the early days of the squire's anger with his son — had been taken away as abruptly as it had been promised. He did not mind very much as regards the actual loss of the estates, but he

felt he had been trifled with and made a fool of; and there is nothing natures like Donald's — or, for the matter of that, most natures — resent so much as being made to appear foolish.

So the more cordial Tom was the more silent and stiff Donald became ; and the dinner the three men had to themselves was a very constrained sort of affair till the servants had gone and business could be discussed openly.

Why on earth, Donald was wondering, could they not have let him know by letter of the change, instead of calling him off at considerable inconvenience to receive the news in person? Of course it was all right and just and much to be desired that the squire and his son should have made up their quarrel before the old man died, but the edifying arrangement might have been communicated by post to a person to whom, like himself, the reconciliation made such a material alteration.

Altogether Donald was feeling rather like the elder brother in the parable, and he could not feel very amiably toward the prodigal son who was helping him so hospitably to the fatted calf at the head of the table.

Mr. Sargent, looking on and not guessing the cause of Donald's somewhat stiff and surly behavior, thought that any one who did not know the real state of the case might naturally have concluded that Donald was the disinherited son, disappointed and resentful, and Tom the successful interloper trying to carry off an awkward position. The lawyer felt a

little indignant with Donald for his behavior, for surely Tom Bannister was the one to be considered and gently treated, since in a few days he would be going out of his father's house without a penny of his inheritance in his pocket.

"Well, I suppose he will get all his mother has to leave; but that is not much by the side of Donnington."

But as soon as the servants had withdrawn and the three men were alone, Donald's first words threw some light on the peculiarity of his manner.

"Well," he said with rather a forced little smile, "I think I can make a pretty good guess at what you and Mr. Sargent have to tell me."

"Eh?" said Tom. He was bending down coaxing Druid with a bit of biscuit. The old dog could hardly be persuaded to leave the door of that silent room, or to take any food, and had that strange, appealing, pathetic look in his eyes that animals get in the presence of the great mystery which is hardly more intelligible to us than to them.

But at these words of Donald's, Tom sat up and looked inquiringly across the table at his cousin.

"About my uncle's disposition of his property."

"But you know — He told you what that was."

"Yes, four years ago."

"Well?"

"But you have been here more than a week now."

"Yes."

"And were entirely reconciled."

"Entirely."

"And do you mean to say no alteration was made?"

"None."

Donald turned almost incredulously to the lawyer, who nodded confirmation of Tom's words. "I believe Mr. Bannister was not in a state to attend to business."

"And do you actually mean that no attempt was made to find out his wishes, which must have been entirely altered by this reconciliation?"

Tom turned a little fiercely on his cousin. "Do you think we wanted to worry him on his death-bed? And do you think I was such a cur as to try and come round a sick man and get him to alter what he had settled when he was in full health and possessed all his faculties? It's quite enough for me that we were reconciled before he died, and that was more than I thought possible a fortnight ago; and for the rest, you're heartily welcome to Donnington."

An interlude here occurred by a rattling of the handle of the door and an imperious young voice demanding "daddy," and the indignation faded away from Tom's face as he rose to admit Boy.

"I've come to say good-night; Granny said I might. I helped her to eat her tea. She said I was a very good boy."

The process of saying good-night seemed to include partaking of an orange, for Boy proceeded to tuck a dinner-napkin under his fat chin in a very business-like manner, and Tom stretched out his

hand to the dish as if he quite understood the natural sequence of events.

"This is my son, Donald," Tom said. "Go round and shake hands with your cousin, Boy."

Such a firm, chubby little hand laid in Donald's—such an upright, manly little figure standing by his knee—such an honest, fearless pair of blue eyes looking up at him! Donald was not good with children at any time, and less than usual now, with the memory of a poor little sickly, puny life, over which his wife watched with passionate jealousy; so he only patted the curly head and shook Boy's hand rather formally, and watched in silence the process of peeling the orange and conveying it into the rosy little mouth.

"Now be off, youngster!" Tom said when the last piece of orange had disappeared. And he opened the door for him and stood watching the small figure cross the hall and begin climbing the broad, oak stairs. There was a pleased, proud smile on Tom's lips that had not died away when he came back to his place at the table.

"Tom," Donald said, and his voice was a little husky and unsteady, "I wonder you can endure the sight of me — taking away the inheritance of that fine little fellow! It's a shame! It's a crying piece of injustice! My uncle —"

But Tom could not stand any reflections on the conduct of the father who had blessed him and his boy hardly twenty-four hours before.

"Hold hard, Donald!" he said; "there was no

injustice about it. I had my choice, and if I had to make it over again I should decide just the same. You see, if I'd kept Donnington I should never have had Boy, and I don't call him dear even at that price."

Perhaps he was speaking a little more strongly than he really felt about it, for it certainly was the sight of Boy that brought the pity of it home to him ; but it was only to Ann that he would confess the feeling.

There was a strange look on Donald's face, and Tom remembered suddenly how Ann had told him of one baby's death, and of another little life that there was little hope of coaxing to survive its difficult babyhood ; and he felt sorry that he had flaunted his pride in Boy so insolently in his cousin's face.

"Perhaps," Donald said, "your Boy may be the heir of Donnington after all."

CHAPTER XIX

THE CHIEF MOURNER

Nor rising suns, nor setting suns,
Nor life renewed which springtide bore,
Make one again Death's sundered ones
Together once. — CHRISTINA ROSSETTI.

IT was a gray fitful day, the day of the funeral, with low hanging clouds and a gusty sighing wind and bursts of petulant rain, and now and then uncertain, watery gleams of sunshine — a day gently in harmony with the feelings of the mourners.

It was not among the traditions of the Bannister family that the womenkind should go to funerals, and neither Mrs. Bannister nor her daughters were the sort of people to break through traditions even for the sake of the comfort of being present at the beautiful laying to rest. It was before the time, too, of the exaggerated use of flowers at funerals — a sweet and touching custom which has been rendered ridiculous and unmeaning by being so overdone ; so there were no floral tributes ordered from the florist, the handsomest and most costly coming, as is often the case now, from a mere acquaintance who hardly knew the deceased by sight living, and would certainly not mourn him dead. But Ann and Sophy and Ruth made unscientific wreaths of flowers they had

picked themselves in the gardens and conservatories, violets wet with the soft rain, and snowdrops that grew among the grass on the lawn under the library window where he sat so much, and dainty white azalea from the great bush in the conservatory, which was such a favorite of his, as he said it reminded him of his wife.

"In our courting days, Tom," she would say, with a little conscious rose-blush in her old cheek at the off-repeated compliment, and at the expectation of the invariable reply, "Then and always, lady-love."

Every flower they used had some association with him, and was fastened with a loving memory.

Boy assisted actively and cheerfully in the making of the wreaths — too cheerfully Tom was afraid, and would have called him away, but his sisters protested that they liked having him, and even Mrs. Bannister welcomed him with a tremulous little smile, and was not displeased or upset by his irrepressible admiration for the widow's weeds, at which she herself had hardly ventured to look in the mirror and then with a shuddering horror at their hideousness and a thought of how *he* would have disliked them, followed by a sharp pang of feeling how little it mattered how she looked now, since he was not there to be pleased or vexed.

Boy himself was inordinately pleased with his own mourning attire, which was of more manly cut than he had had before, and tailor-made, which, even at three, makes an appreciable difference.

"Susie will not mind?" Ann had asked anxiously,

with that slight hesitation over the unaccustomed name, that slight as it was jarred on Tom's sensitive ear. "Susie will not mind our getting the mourning for Boy? It would be less trouble than for her to get it and send it down, if she won't think us interfering?"

"Not a bit! Why should she?" Tom declared, though all the same he was guiltily aware what a critical eye would examine every detail of the little suit and the trim little shoes and stockings. These last were in Boy's eyes the culminating point of grandeur, never having advanced beyond socks before, and being naturally anxious to impress every one with whom he came in contact with the dignified clothing of his young legs, and to further enlighten them as to how the stockings were kept up by elastic garters — of such a bright blue color that it really seemed quite a pity they should be entirely out of sight.

Tom found him displaying them to his mother when he came in to tell her of the arrival of various relations who had come from a distance.

"Don't let him bother you, dear," he said, and took Boy away with him down into the hall, where the funeral party were mustering, and where that odd atmosphere of constraint and embarrassment prevailed that is peculiar to most funerals, but more especially in this instance with the disinherited son receiving them all so cordially, and poor Donald, the heir, evidently feeling so awkward and uncomfortable.

No one knew exactly how to behave. Tom did not in any way invite commiseration except for the loss of his father, and if any one had openly shown it about the loss of the property it would have seemed discourteous to Donald, who, on the other hand, did not appear at all a subject for congratulation, and was nervously desirous to avoid observation, having, moreover, a bad cold in his head, which did not improve his personal appearance, and fidgeted him with the fear that his frequent use of the pocket-handkerchief would be mistaken for real or assumed grief.

Some one had had a glass of sherry, and the smell of this and black kid gloves was for many years suggestive to Boy's mind of his grandfather's funeral, long after the actual events of the day had faded from his memory.

Boy's appearance caused a very welcome diversion, and relieved the strain of conversation which conventionality required should be kept away from nearly all the subjects on which the incongruous gathering of friends and relations might have found anything in common, as, of course, there would have been something almost approaching indecency in discussing the money market or the hunting, and even politics or the latest news in the morning paper were scarcely appropriate topics for such an occasion. The weather, too, is soon exhausted, especially such very seasonable February weather, with the rain coming patterning on the staircase window and the wind sighing through the bare elms, and a wan

little gleam of sun coming now and then and throwing the colors of the Bannister arms emblazoned in the window on to the black coats of the company gathered in the hall.

One such gleam came as they carried the coffin down the stairs, touching it with soft red and blue and gold, like a tender valediction to the old master.

Most of the relations present either had now, or used to have, or hoped to have some day, children belonging to them, and Boy, being of a friendly and sociable disposition and not afflicted with shyness, was soon very much at home with them, and began trying on the black kid gloves of one elderly cousin and looking at the watch of another, whose figure was of so portly a character as not to allow room on his knees for Boy to take a seat, and who was happily afflicted with deafness, which prevented him hearing Boy's comments on the fact.

I think he had begun to confide the interesting subject of the garters to one of the party, and was preparing to put on the hat of another with the deep band round it, only Tom quickly intervened — to prevent the introduction of such a comic element as Boy's rosy face and curly head disappearing into a large, solemn tall hat.

So Boy was despatched upstairs again, and when the funeral cortège started from the hall Tom was aware of a fluttering handkerchief from one of the upper windows — a gay little signal, quaintly out of place with the great mournful stillness of the house,

with the blinds closely drawn as if it could not bear to look on the dark procession bearing its master away. Yet Tom felt a little touch of pleasure at the thought of this very unconventional and spontaneous farewell from the small grandson.

The waving hand was suddenly withdrawn as if some one from within had become conscious of the sad breach of propriety that was taking place, and Tom pictured to himself Mrs. Partridge or Miss Ellis the maid, who even in the deepest grief could not lose sight of etiquette, tearfully protesting against such a shocking offence against it as Boy's demonstration.

But in the process of withdrawal, or of *malice pre-pense* on the part of the small offender against the solemn usages of polite society, the pocket-handkerchief escaped from the hand and came fluttering down right on the shoulder of one of the undertaker's men, revealing a small and not particularly clean handkerchief, on the very coarse fabric of which was emblazoned in pink the legend of little Bo-peep ; and Tom remembered well having bought it for Boy at one of the cheap little haberdasher's shops in the purlieu of Corsham Street, and the ecstatic admiration Boy had expressed for it.

Boy felt a little aggrieved at his sudden removal from the window, and had pangs of regret for his cherished pocket-handkerchief, especially as Mrs. Partridge and Miss Ellis were making such constant use of theirs just then, and completely blocking up the window — though they could not see much of the long procession moving so stately and slow along the

avenue of leafless elms — while they were mopping their streaming eyes.

Boy began to feel decidedly injured as he sat on the floor behind those two black agitated backs, till Druid came, all in mourning too, except the large red tongue that swept over Boy's blinking face in great dumb sympathy. Druid's long, soft ears could be used, if necessary, for drying his eyes, which, however, were full of a grief too deep for tears. And then Boy thought it would cheer Druid to see those garters of his, and he was telling him a good deal about them when Aunt Ann came and took him and Druid to the old schoolroom at the back of the house, from the window of which could be seen the turn of the road along which the funeral would pass before it reached the church.

The window was open, and through it the low deep tone of the tolling bell sounded, and those three — Aunt Ann, and Boy, and Druid — sat in the window-seat and watched and listened ; and if Druid's ears were not needed for his own tears, others dropped on them and on Boy's curly head pressed close against the black one.

And presently when the distant procession had passed and the deep bell was still, Ann went to her mother ; and mother and daughters sat very near together and held one another close, and read the beautiful comforting words that the rector was saying in a very choked voice at the church over there, and they cried and comforted one another ; while Boy and Druid sat on the hearthrug, and Boy

Boy arranged a long procession of reels out of Ann's work-basket



arranged a long procession of reels out of Ann's work-basket as mourners following the pincushion to its grave in the fender, a procession sadly disturbed now and then by a movement of Druid's feathery tail.

CHAPTER XX

THE WILL

He is not here; but far away
The noise of life begins again,
And ghastly thro' the drizzling rain
On the bald street breaks the blank day.—TENNYSON.

“**M**Ay I come in?” Tom said. The luncheon that had been ready on their return from church was over, and most of the guests dispersed; but the mother and sisters had been excused from being present at the dreary festivity, which had been unspeakably irksome to Tom.

There had been a big gathering at the church; and he had met old friends who had looked kindly and sympathetically at him, and cordial hands had pressed his, and voices husky with honest emotion had spoken affectionately of the old father. All this would have been comforting and gratifying in other circumstances, but now it only seemed to bring home to Tom all he had lost — this great legacy good men in all ranks of life leave to their sons, the friendship and esteem of those around them, the regard of men whose friendship is worth having, and which would have been his for his father's sake, but which would hardly follow him to Corsham Street. Should he leave such a legacy to Boy? Then

there was the concern and regret on his own account, apparent though unexpressed, in the condolences of old family friends who knew there had been a serious misunderstanding between himself and his father that threatened to affect the inheritance, with the underlying hope, which his presence gave rise to, that it had been satisfactorily arranged.

He felt conscious, and so, no doubt, did Donald, of curious glances at the two who followed first and stood by the graveside together. He was glad to get out of the way of inquiring eyes, even though they might be kind and sympathetic. He felt an irritable wish that he and Donald could have been ticketed, so that every one might understand at a glance that his cousin was the heir — no, the owner — of all the Donnington estates, and that he was the outcast disinherited, with nothing at all but Susie and Boy, and that he was quite contented with the bargain.

He was fidgeted with the feeling that he ought to make it apparent, and take up an evident position as second fiddle and thrust Donald forward.

"It's Donald's fault," he told himself. "What a fellow he is! — always hanging back and keeping behind. Why can't he assert himself more? Some one must take the lead, and it's no use mincing and hesitating like two old dowagers over precedence. So if Donald won't, I must. But I'll clear out as soon as I can, and then he'll have to take up his position, anyhow."

But after luncheon, when most of the party had

gone except Donald and his two brothers, and that elderly cousin whose want of practicable knees for sitting purposes Boy had commented on, and they and Mr. Sargent were preparing to adjourn to the library and read the will, Tom felt that his time of escape had come.

"You will not want me," he said ; "in fact, I think I shall be better out of the way, and I 'll go up to my mother. Donald and I understand one another — don't we? There 's no ill-feeling. If I can be of any use, send up for me and I 'll come directly. But I must make the most of the time I have with my mother, as I have to be off the first thing to-morrow. We business men have to be chary of our time — eh, Sargent?"

But the old lawyer's face was not to be betrayed into a smile. Tom had always been a prime favorite of his, and the whole business was most distasteful to him ; and he could barely behave civilly to Donald, though he felt the injustice of venting his displeasure on the unoffending head of the new squire.

How empty the house seemed as Tom went up to his mother's room ! The light that comes in when the shutters are opened and the blinds drawn up after a funeral seems to show the emptiness so cruelly, setting the loss in the plain, matter-of-fact distinctness of every day life, pointing a cold finger to the dreary mechanism of life going on just the same without what we had almost grown to think was its mainspring, and harshly bidding the dead past bury its dead. We would fain go back to the quiet

days before the funeral, when the windows are darkened and the mourners go about the streets, and life seems to pause for a moment while we stand gazing up into heaven.

And besides the emptiness, he seemed to realize now for the first time that Donnington was his home no longer. As long as the dead lay there it had been his father's house, to which, disinherited as he was, he had a right to come, and everything about it, even small shabbinesses and dilapidations, were dear to him as part of the old home. Now he found himself looking at it all with an appraising eye as at another man's house, and noting that some paint was needed here and a pane of glass to replace the cracked one there, and that a more modern and efficient method of lighting the hall and staircase would be an improvement.

For the owner of the house was sitting down there in the library, the door of which, as it closed behind him, seemed to shut Tom out finally from his patrimony; while up there the open door of his father's room spoke with a silent eloquence of the departure and "the nakedness and vacancy" it had left behind.

It struck a chill to his heart, and he gave a little shiver as he went into his mother's room, the pleasant morning room which was actually just the same as he remembered from his earliest days, when he did his first lessons there and kept his best toys in the chiffonnier cupboard. It was warm with a brightly-blazing wood-fire, and sunny with a fitful

gleam of the low sun through the clouds, the soft shining after rain; both warm and sunny, too, with a mother's tender smile and a hand held out to welcome him to the chair drawn close to hers on the hearth.

Yet even that seemed changed, and, with a quick flash, he saw it as the boudoir of Donald's wife, all pretty and fresh and spick and span — a clean sweep made of the old, faded chintz and the stiff but somehow harmonious furniture, and the old traditions connected with it.

"Are you cold, Tom?" his mother asked anxiously. "I was afraid I heard you coughing last night. Susie will think we have not been taking care of you. The girls have taken Boy out into the garden. I thought you would be coming up, and I wanted to have you to myself; and besides, it will do them good. Are you sure you must go to-morrow morning? Oh yes, of course; I must not be selfish. It has been good of Susie to spare you to us so long, and she must be longing to have you and Boy back. You will tell her what a comfort he has been; I don't know how we should have got through to-day if it had not been for him. But when we are settled at Elmhurst she will bring him for a long visit? Donald is very good and kind and considerate, and I know there would be no hurry about our moving; but the girls quite agree with me we would rather go as soon as possible. Donnington can never be the same without him, and we don't want to get used to it. It's nothing at all to leave now, because one does n't feel any-

thing much except his loss ; but perhaps one may begin to remember other things by and by, though I don't feel as if I ever should, and then it might be a wrench to pull up one's old roots."

So they talked of the future quietly, with that feeling which comes after a great grief of how little everything else signifies, and of what a little time there is to look forward to and provide for—that feeling being naturally so much stronger in her, that she dashed away a sudden dimming of the eyes almost impatiently, as if there were hardly time even to mourn.

Tom had forgotten all about that business conclave down in the library, and he got up rather unwillingly and with a slight feeling of irritation when Milsom came to say that his presence was required there.

"Mr. Sargent will be obliged if you will please step down, sir. And Mr. Donald, he"—

But before the message had been delivered Donald himself appeared behind the old butler—Donald, with a strangely excited, agitated look, and a manner very unlike his usual precise and self-conscious habit. He was out of breath, too, less it seemed from his hasty run upstairs than from the hurry of the words that tumbled helter-skelter and confused from his lips.

In other circumstances you might have thought that his head had been turned by sudden and unexpected prosperity, or even that he had partaken too freely of wine at the lugubrious luncheon.

"What on earth's the matter?" Tom said rather

testily. He felt he had behaved very well to Donald, and with great consideration ; but if he were going in for hysterics, and proposed to carry on a scene before his mother, Tom felt as if his patience would hardly hold out. "All right ! I 'll come downstairs if there 's anything I can do. Hold hard, old fellow ! I 'm not leaving just yet, and there 'll be plenty of time to shake hands and wish you joy !" For Donald had seized one of Tom's hands and was wringing it with energy. "I say, shut up ; there 's a good fellow !" this *sotto voce*, "and don't upset the mater. She has been through a great deal to-day."

"But you don't understand," gasped Donald. "I tell you it 's all right. We 've found a codicil made six months ago that Sargent had not a notion of. But it 's all right and regular ; and I tell you what it is, Tom, I was never so glad of anything in my life — never ! Why, man alive !" — for Tom was gazing at him with a half-stupefied, half-angry incredulity — "if you don't believe me look there !" — and he held out a sheet of blue paper — "or ask old Sargent. He wanted to have you down, but I could n't resist coming to tell you myself. I 'm so awfully glad !"

Tom stood staring dully at the paper in his hand, on which was set forth, in the old familiar handwriting : "This is a codicil to my will. I hereby revoke all the devises and bequests contained in my said will to my nephew, Donald Bannister, and in lieu thereof hereby bequeath to him a sum of five

thousand pounds ; and I hereby devise and bequeath all the lands, money, and effects, which by my said will I had given to my said nephew, to my dear son Thomas Bannister, absolutely, and in all other respects I confirm my said will."

It was signed by the squire, and attested by Milsom and one of the stablemen ; but I do not think Tom saw much more than the words, "my dear son," or heard Donald's somewhat incoherent account of how it had been found in the squire's drawer after Mr. Sargent had read the will, in which Tom's name found no place.

There was a letter to Donald with it, asking his pardon for the alteration which would make such a difference in his prospects. "As if," Donald said, with an evident sincerity in his face and voice, "I was not just the one who is most glad about it. It was written six months ago, or rather more. I fancy he had been out of sorts, and had been thinking over matters a bit. He was just that sort — wasn't he? — that when he made up his mind to do anything he'd do it there and then, without putting it off or see-sawing over it like many do till it is too late. Milsom says he remembers quite well being called in one evening to attest my uncle's signature, and he brought Evans in with him, who was late at the stables that night attending to one of the horses who was ill."

Mrs. Bannister also recalled that evening when Quicksilver had a slight strain, and the squire was fidgety about him — unnecessarily she had thought —

and had laughed with the girls at having seen the groom coming out of the library in the evening, having been, as they thought, to give the latest bulletin of the favorite.

She remembered, too, how the squire had come into the drawing-room afterwards with a contented look in his eyes, which again they had attributed to the improved report of Quicksilver, though that did not account for his stopping to look at the sketch of Tom which hung in the drawing-room as a boy of twelve on his pony.

Donald told most of his story to Mrs. Bannister, whom he had hitherto avoided in a shame-faced sort of way, cutting very short the only interviews that could not be got out of with that odd sort of offended manner self-conscious people sometimes assume to cover deep feeling, and hurrying past the door of her room as if his very presence in the passage outside would be an intrusion.

Now he found himself talking to her easily and unaffectedly, and when Tom, as almost immediately happened, left them, Donald took the seat by her side as another son might have done, and by and by slipped almost unconsciously into talking of his own affairs, and of the anxiety in his heart for the little sick child at home, a feeling that he had until now kept rigidly out of sight with the conviction that it was nobody's concern but his, and that nobody would care; and now Mrs. Bannister was soothing and encouraging and advising, as if she had no trouble of her own to occupy her thoughts.

"Why didn't you tell me before, Donald?" she said. "You must have been so dreadfully anxious."

"Tell you?" he said with a little choke in his voice. "I was such a miserable, suspicious brute I almost thought you might be glad to hear how little chance there was for my poor baby. Yes"—stopping the horrified exclamation of denial—"of course, I ought to have been ashamed of myself, but I knew you could n't bear the sight of me. Yes, I know you're an angel; but it was not in human nature not to hate the unlucky fellow who was in Tom's place, and, I can tell you, I hated myself pretty bad most of the time."

And so they talked on into the soft February twilight, and made plans for Minnie to bring the baby to Donnington to see what Donnington air and Mrs. Bannister's experience could do for the little frail life.

Tom, they concluded, was down in the library discussing the wonderful turn in the wheel of fortune; but Mr. Sargent waited for him for some time in vain, and ultimately joined the sisters and Boy in the garden, for Tom had turned in at the open door of his father's room and closed it behind him, and was kneeling by the bed, realizing what seemed to him the main point in that codicil that his father had forgiven him.

CHAPTER XXI

GOING TO FETCH SUSIE

A happy lover who has come
To look on her who loves him well,
Who 'lights and rings the gateway bell,
And learns her gone and far from home;
He saddens, all the magic light
Dies off at once from bower and hall,
And all the place is dark, and all
The chambers emptied of delight.—TENNYSON.

THE next morning Tom set off on his way up to London by the earliest train, but he went alone, as it was not worth while for Boy to go up just for one day. Only one day's absence from Donnington instead of a life-time! Indeed, Tom tried to wring out of the stubbornly unaccommodating Bradshaw that there would be time to catch the evening train and bring Susie home—only think of that! home!—that very day.

But Bradshaw was not to be cajoled into agreement with Tom's wishes, and after all, he consoled himself, they would want a little time for packing up—little enough to pack, Heaven knows!—and settle up and shake the dust of that beastly hole off their feet. He was not complimentary to Corsham Street now that there was no need to make the best of it; but as he turned the corner once more into the shabby

little street, he thought he had not till that moment realized its meanness and dinginess to their full extent.

The weather certainly was unfavorable for bringing out the picturesqueness of objects, being gray and gloomy with an occasional drizzle of cold rain, and a gusty little wind that met you at corners and buffeted you, and tried to turn your umbrella inside out.

But in the best of weather Corsham Street could not appear attractive, and perhaps against a sunset sky or under a midsummer sun looked worse by force of contrast even with the softening veil of smoke that London provided.

Poor little Susie ! Tom's heart was beating in a very lover-like way as he wrestled with his umbrella at the corner.

All the way up he had been thinking of her and of how he should tell her the wonderful news, and of what she would say. "After all, perhaps, it is a good thing we can't possibly get home to-night. Susie will want to get some mourning ; she won't like to go home in colors. I told her to get some when first I wrote to tell her he was gone, but if she has done so I expect, good little soul, she has done it as cheaply as possible ; and, by Jove ! she shall have a regular good rig-out !" And Tom looked into the purse which Mr. Sargent had liberally supplied for present necessities, with considerable satisfaction.

"And I must go to my tailors." He looked disparagingly at the mourning suit, which had seemed to

him rather extravagantly good when he had ordered it from the obsequious tailor from the county town.

Involuntarily he took up his bag and walked out of the station on reaching London, and smiled to himself at this proof of economical habits, and resolved to stick to such as regarded himself and not fall into the pleasant old habit of squandering on hansoms.

"And there's plenty of time, as we're not going down to-night."

No. 35. Some slipshod children had fastened a skipping-rope to the railings next door, and he had to deviate into the road to avoid it.

He gave an eager glance at the windows with the confident expectation of seeing the small watching face, which he was sure would be there even if the letter he had written yesterday to tell of his return had not reached her. How many hours of those three weeks had she spent in that listless, dreary watching?

Well, thank Heaven! all that was over and done with.

But she was not there now, and perhaps it was quite as well, for she would have been expecting to see Boy, and there might have been just a bitter minute or two of fear on his account before Tom could have reassured her.

The front door was open, Mary-Jane having been debating something with a young man on the doorstep and having retired to the top of the kitchen stairs to consult in screeching accents on some point with Mrs. Martin, so Tom went in unannounced.

How narrow, how dirty the passage looked, with that stale smell hanging about it that his nostrils had forgotten in the sweet, clean country air.

He paused with his hand on the door-handle. It was about time for the unattractive mid-day meal — he would take Susie out and give her a really nice dinner that evening, that he would! — so no doubt his poor little girl was sitting solitary at the table.

It would startle her his going in, so he knocked lightly on the door with that special knock he used to give sometimes when he had gone out without his latchkey, and wanted her to let him in without troubling Mrs. Martin or Mary-Jane.

But there was no answer, and he turned the handle softly and pushed back the door with "Hullo? Any one at home?"

The room was empty, no fire was lighted in the grate, no mid-day meal laid ready on the table — nor had been for several days judging by the dust which lay on some of the letters and newspapers, though it had not yet gathered on the more recent ones, one of which he recognized in that first photographic snapshot glance as the one he had written yesterday from Donnington.

He stood looking round in a dazed bewilderment. What on earth did it all mean? And then, with a sudden inspiration for which he felt most thankful afterwards, he closed the door so as to give himself time to grasp the situation before he had betrayed the utter consternation which overwhelmed him to

Mrs. Martin or Mary-Jane, whose shuffling footsteps he heard returning from the kitchen stairs.

The letter he wrote yesterday — yes, and the one of the day before, and the day before that, and another and another, black-edged since his father's death except the one announcing the fact, which was sealed ; and before that all those letters he had written daily during his father's illness — fond, foolish, lover-like letters — some of them, too, containing remittances. He arranged them one after another, according to date, with that odd preciseness that comes sometimes in moments of stupefaction, as if it were of the greatest importance that they should lie in an accurate row side by side according to date. All of them were there except the first he wrote from Donnington on the Saturday, which was missing ; and the telegram — no, there it was crumpled up in the waste-paper basket. He got it out and smoothed out the crumples and read the words, "Boy quite well, but my father ill, and we are at Donnington. Shall not be home till Monday. Will write. — Tom," as if they might contain an explanation of the mystery.

There were letters and newspapers addressed to him, business letters mostly he could see at a glance, many of them having no doubt to do with his work, which would have been of most vital importance if he had been coming back to take up the old reporting business.

"I asked her to send them on," he said with a moment's irritation, forgetting that the request was

in one of those unopened letters on the table. It did not matter now even if it cost him all his hardly won openings of literary occupation; but he was sorry they should have remained unanswered as it must have seemed so rude and unbusinesslike, and some of the fellows had been very kind.

But this was only a little digression from the pre-occupation of his mind on Susie, and he was sweeping all these unimportant communications away and had stretched out his hand to the bell to summon Mrs. Martin, preparing himself for the long-winded explanation and very likely ill-natured suggestions with which that good lady was sure to deluge him, when one of the letters caught his eye with the Liverpool postmark.

I have said he was not familiar with Susie's writing as he had never had a letter from her, so it is not to be wondered at that he did not recognize it at a glance.

"Dearest Tom," it ran, "I hope you will not be vexed with me when you come home and find me gone. I am very broken-hearted to leave you and Boy, but Polly has no one but me, and she is ill and wants me very badly; and as you are at home with your people you won't want me. I knew, all along, and that was part why I would not come, that you were really going home; and Polly says it will make it much easier if I am out of the way. So I am going, anyhow, to New York with her, as she is not really fit to go alone; and if you are angry I can't help it, but I hope you won't be; and I

will write from New York. And don't let Boy forget his mother ; and I hope your father is all right again.— Your affectionate wife, SUSIE."

Tom read this letter two or three times through before he could realize or believe what had happened, for it must be remembered that this was the very first revelation to Tom of those suspicions of Susie's as to the intention of his visit to Birches Farm ; and being naturally honest and straightforward himself it did not occur to him that other people might suspect ulterior motives, or read between those very plain, round-hand lines of his.

And then, too, he had to make allowances for her difficulty in expressing herself. Most likely the letter did not convey half she meant to say, and maybe an awkward, unintentional turn of a phrase may have conveyed more. He weighed these simple, childish words of Susie's with the most severe and concentrated thought, taking into account all he knew of the writer, which was everything, he would have said only a short time ago ; but of late he was aware of some fresh element which had a little blurred the crystal clearness of his view into his young wife's heart. Some fresh influence had been brought to bear—and whose could that be but Polly's? And it was no doubt Polly who had been insinuating distrust of his intentions in this visit to Birches Farm into Susie's mind, and the telegram and his subsequent letter must have appeared entirely to confirm these suspicions. But the main thing now was how to retrieve this miserable catastrophe as soon and

with as little scandal as possible. He must telegraph to Susie to return as soon as she could, and meantime no one but perhaps his mother and sisters need know that she had gone without his knowledge.

So Mary-Jane jumped nearly out of her skin, as she graphically described it, at hearing the dining-room bell ring, "as there was n't no one there to my certing knowledge when I stood there talking to Cooper's man." But there before her astonished eyes sat Mr. Bannister, opening the letters on the table.

"Hullo, Mary-Jane," he said, "here I am, you see. I expect Mrs. Martin thought I was never coming back any more."

"Well, we was wondering, missus and me; and 't were only yesterday as she said as how she would put up the 'apartments to let' if she did n't hear of you soon."

"Well, she may put them up at once if she likes, for I sha'n't want them after to-day."

"Lor' now! Why, I did hope as you'd come to stay. And missus have had the chimbly seen to as used to smoke, as it draw beautiful now."

"All right," said Tom, "so much the better for the next lodger. Ask Mrs. Martin to come up and speak to me, will you?"

But Mary-Jane stopped at the door, twisting her dirty apron. "I 'ope Master Boy's quite well?"

"Yes; flourishing, thank you."

"Is he with his mar?"

"No," said Tom rather shortly, and then with a

little laugh, "with his grandmar. He often talks of you, Mary-Jane; you were very kind to him, the young monkey."

Shortly afterwards Mrs. Martin appeared, rather stately and prepared to do battle on the matter of rent for these weeks when the rooms stood empty, "as I might have let over and over, and good lets, too, to folks as I know and did their best to persuade me, but I said, 'No,' I says, 'as long as I've not had notice I don't reckon the rooms mine to let; they're Mr. Bannister's rooms till he give notice as he don't want them, and as long as he acts honest by me, as he's always a-done, I'll do the same by him.' "

"Well, Mrs. Martin, then I'll give you a week's notice now; and if you'll make out what I owe you I'll settle up before I leave to-morrow — no, I think it will be to-night."

For Tom felt as if the evening in Corsham Street without Susie would be more than he could bear.

"I hope Mrs. Bannister is quite well?"

Tom was conscious of a quiet little thrust in these commonplace words, though Mrs. Martin spoke them as if butter would not melt in her mouth, casting down her eyes meekly and smoothing her black alpaca apron; and he proceeded to parry it at once with a pleasant, nonchalant reply.

"Quite, thanks. I heard from her this morning. The change will do her good."

"Yes, poor dear!" Mrs. Martin purred, with that amiable manner that reminded Tom of a sleek cat

with claws sheathed but ready for use. "She was very sadly the day you left, though she cheer up in the evening when the young lady — I don't rightly know her name — come to fetch her; and she did n't come in till after twelve. I remember it, because I looked at the clock when the bell rang, having sent Mary-Jane to bed with the faceache."

Tom had considerable control over his expression, for Mrs. Martin's quick little eyes scanned his imperturbable face in vain for any manifestation of surprise and annoyance. But it was well she could not see his heart, which was murderously inclined towards this woman who had spied on Susie and was trying to make mischief between them.

"It must have been quite a surprise to you," he said genially, "Mrs. Bannister settling to go to New York with Miss Wilmot?"

He was not quite sure of his ground nor how much Mrs. Martin might know, as it was just possible though hardly likely that, for want of a better, Susie might have made a confidante of the landlady. But he saw by a little twitch of the pursed-up mouth that he had taken the wind out of her sails, just when she was prepared to bear down upon him with a detailed account of what she would have described as Susie's "goings on" directly her husband's back was turned, finishing up by packing up her trunks and going off on the Monday morning "with that painted-up creature as come to see her, as Martin takes his oath is a play-actor, and, anyhow, no better than she should be."

And now, apparently, Mr. Bannister knew all about it, and indeed more than Mrs. Martin herself; and she proceeded to give herself away by her next remark, instead of making it more difficult for Tom by keeping her council and leaving him in doubt of how much she knew of Susie's intentions.

"Oh, indeed! Mrs. Bannister did n't mention as she was going to New York, and she did n't leave no directions about her letters, as have come regular one every morning since she left."

Mrs. Martin glanced guilelessly at the row of letters on the table, and Tom flushed a little with the consciousness that she knew the letters were in his writing and that their regular arrival was scarcely in accordance with an accurate knowledge of his wife's movements.

"Oh, these don't signify. I sent these here, and I see they have n't been called for; but really it's of no importance."

"I wonder what she'll make of that?" If his heart had not been so sore it would have been almost amusing baffling this old cat, who had scented out something amiss and was willing enough to make it worse, and ready to overwhelm him with fulsome sympathy and blacken his little innocent Susie (tiresome, vexatious little girl to have put him in such a quandary!), and to have built up nasty little suspicions and odious conjectures till a fair case for divorce proceedings might have been made out. What a witness Mrs. Martin would have made in the divorce court! — such chaste propriety and prim

purity, thinly covering the ravening and wickedness of the inward parts !

"And Mary-Jane tells me as Master Boy—poor little dear ! — is with his grandma?"

"Yes, till Mrs. Bannister's return."

"And I hope—if you'll excuse me, sir—as the old gentleman is better?"

Mrs. Martin had not been slow to detect the more prosperous air about Tom, and she had also taken note of the mourning-band on his hat, and she had formed her own conclusion from the black edges that had appeared on the envelopes with the Post-ham postmark. But in Mrs. Martin's rank of life the announcement of a death is regarded as such a privilege and to impart such dignity and importance to its proclaimer, that it would not have been etiquette to forestall the intelligence, even though she did not feel kindly to Tom for having robbed her of the opportunity of pouring out much virtuous eloquence on Susie's misdoings.

It was likewise etiquette to receive the news that old Mr. Bannister was no more, with surprise amounting to consternation, which incited Tom to an almost flippant manner of alluding to it—"as ain't no 'eart nor respeck for his parients," as she said when she retired indignant and ruffled to the kitchen.

"But all the same, Martin," she added emphatically to her husband, "I don't believe as he knew a word about his wife having gone off till he got here to-day. So it ain't no use his trying to come over me with his cool imperence."

CHAPTER XXII

COMPARISONS

I wonder when you felt the chill
That killed your love for me?
For, dear, you know I love you still,
Though far across the sea.

I wonder!

I wonder where on God's fair earth
Or in God's fairer heav'n
You'll know my heart and all its worth,
The past — forgot, forgiven?

I wonder. — V. M. C. S.

TOM travelled back to Donnington two days later with a very heavy, uneasy heart. He had been able to glean very little information about Contarini's company at the Memnon. The authorities there were, or professed to be, entirely ignorant of the intended movements of the party in America, or even to be accurately informed of the artistes composing the company — though this, Tom felt, did not signify, as Susie was of course an outsider, merely accompanying Polly as a friend. But when he found that one of the names given him — Miss Tufton — was still acting in London, it made him doubtful altogether of the veracity of the information given him at the theatre.

At Polly's lodgings, likewise, he did not gather

very much except that Miss Wilmot had not been well before she went, and had left an address at some hotel at New York for letters to be forwarded; but the landlady had somehow mislaid the address, but it did not signify, "as there were n't no letters to speak of."

Her rooms had already been let to some other theatrical lady of a more social and lively sort than Polly, as a somewhat noisy luncheon party was going on when Tom was making inquiries, with the pop of champagne corks and much laughter, and an occasional interlude on the banjo, accompanied apparently by a bit of a step-dance boisterously applauded.

The servant and the landlady could give but small attention to the tall, serious-looking gentleman who was worrying about events which had already become ancient history, put on the shelf by the all-engrossing present.

And don't you know, reader, by experience, how difficult it is sometimes to find out details of public events that have happened a month or so ago? It is much easier to put your finger on the particulars of the battle of Waterloo, or even that of Marathon.

A late arrival for the luncheon party jostled against him in the passage, and put up an insolent eye-glass for all apology.

Tom came away angry and sick at heart, wrongly imagining that this was the sort of company into which Susie would be thrown by associating with Polly.

At the offices of the line of steamships he was able

to find out Polly's name among the passengers who had left Liverpool on the 12th of February ; and though Mrs Bannister's name was not there, he concluded that one or other of the long list of names represented Susie. There also he learnt that the s.s. *Britannic* had already reached New York.

At the theatrical agents he gathered that Signor Contarini's plans were unsettled, and depended on instructions awaiting him at New York, but that in all probability he would go straight to Chicago, that being his intention when he left England.

So Tom telegraphed to Susie both at New York and Chicago under cover to theatrical agents there, and likewise to the offices of the steamship company. Afterwards he blamed himself for not having put it at once into the hands of the private inquiry office ; but there is something revolting in using, for setting right a foolish, thoughtless escapade of a silly girl, an instrument which is often employed for the detection of crime or for groping about in the mud for proofs of impurity.

So Tom went back to Donnington in a baffled and irritated condition, feeling that all his efforts had produced a most unsatisfactory result, and that most likely he would have to possess his soul in patience and keep up the best appearance that he could before other people till he received that letter which Susie had promised to write from New York ; and which, indeed, might be already on its way, even if Susie herself were not on her way home, having accompanied Polly so far on her road.

The journey down which he had looked forward to as such a pleasure to Susie, with all its unusual comfort of first-class travelling, was only tiresome and provokingly slow. The carriage was stuffy ; the light was not good enough to read the papers, which a week ago he would have thought it sinful extravagance to buy, so he beat an impatient tattoo on the rain-blurred window, past which the dull, sodden country slipped in dreary monotony.

Susie would have had a child-like appreciation of the first-class carriage and obsequious porters, and of the tall footman waiting at Postham to receive them and escort them to the comfortable brougham and pair outside the station, with warm fur rugs to keep them from the cold during the short time the horses took to cover the four miles of road from the station to Donnington.

And then, too, the reception ! He recognized with a full heart the kind, tender thought that had arranged that when the carriage drew up at the steps and the door opened hospitably wide to receive them, it should be a little curly-headed figure that should stand alone in the doorway with the warm light pouring out from behind him.

Boy should be the one to welcome his mother to the home that had been too long closed to her ; and the grandmother and aunts held back to allow of the meeting between mother and child, which seemed almost too sacred a thing for spectators.

Tom, as he appreciated the thought, remembered with a pang Susie's suspicions of his fine lady critical

sisters, and her shrinking fear of his mother, who would not think her half good enough for her son.

But Mrs. Bannister, after the brief delay allowed for the meeting with Boy, was there to receive the young daughter-in-law literally with open arms ; and the sisters were prepared to make the pleasant little fuss over arrivals that women know how to do, and to make much of Susie and bring her in and take off her wraps, and get her warm by the fire and make her very much at home, and, best of all, regale her with stories of Boy, which is the best welcome and refreshment ingenuity can invent for a mother.

Tom could see how all this programme had been — prepared, I was going to say ; but it had not been prepared, it was all spontaneous — there was nothing artificial or arranged about it. But he fully appreciated it as he came in alone, with Boy making noise enough for six and too pleased to see his father again to have room for disappointment about his mother.

“Susie will not be here for a few days,” Tom said. “I find she has gone away with a friend of hers who is ill, but I hope it will not be very long before she returns.”

And then Boy filled up the awkward pause by his vociferous claim on his father’s attention, and later on Tom told his mother all about it.

“I think your little Susie must be very kind-hearted,” Mrs. Bannister said, though she gave a little anxious look at her son’s troubled face. “She

must be a very stanch friend, as she could not let her cousin travel alone when she was ill and wanted her."

"I think she is a shocking little goose!" Tom said. And you cannot think how much good it did him to put into words even such a very slight modicum of blame, seeing that now and henceforth his constant attitude must be defence of Susie against the world's criticism. It is such a relief to stand at ease for a minute when one is generally at attention; for Tom, sorely against his will and almost unconsciously, was beginning to realize that there might be things in Susie which the world would criticise. Perhaps he had first had a fidgety little prick of it when his mother had said, "Tell me about Susie," and he had found that the story soon became monotonous. But it had only troubled him slightly when they talked of his bringing her to Elmhurst, a pretty, unpretending little place where Susie would not be awed or constrained by state or ceremony, and where she would come as the wife of a poor, hardworking journalist, and as such would not be expected to be very fashionable or dignified. He had not felt it at all that first evening when he knew Donnington was to be his and Susie's home — the pleasure and delight of it swept away all nervous apprehensions, and he only thought of how Susie would like this and admire the other, and of her innocent enjoyment of the new life.

So, too, on the way up he was thinking entirely of taking his sweetheart, his little wife, his love away from the sordid dreariness of Corsham Street

and bringing her into the pleasant brightness and affluence of Donnington, without any of the vexatious money worries to draw lines on the fair little brow, or disappointments and self-denials to make the corners of the fresh young mouth droop despondently.

If Susie could have come back with him, as he had planned, if not indeed that very night but the next morning, and taken her place then and there with all the freshness and childish enjoyment which so disarm criticism, any small difficulties that might have arisen — lack of manner and want of knowledge of *les convenances* — would have been met one by one and treated as the trifles they really were. But now, in this interval, Tom, being no doubt nervous and overwrought by the strain of his father's illness and the anxiety and agitation that had preceded and followed his death, had time to imagine all sorts of awkward situations that most probably would never happen, and remember small tricks and solecisms against conventional behavior that had hardly been more than amusing in Corsham Street, but that now made him grow hot and fidgety when he thought of the same at Donnington among the rather precise and old-fashioned county people with whom they visited, or even under the eyes of the servants, who are unrecognized powers for keeping up the standard of manners.

Tom hated himself for these unworthy thoughts, and accused himself of disloyalty and snobbishness ; and in self-defence, or rather in defence of Susie,

became critical if not censorious about the cut-and-dried manners of young ladies, the little conventionalities and proprieties and the want of naturalness that made them all as much alike as a row of dolls in a toyshop, and as uninteresting.

Ruth, who did not guess the cause of his strictures, was rather inclined to take up the cudgels for young ladies in general and for Margaret Beresford in particular, when she was the case under discussion ; but Ann, with that magnetic power of sympathy which she possessed in such a high degree, kept silence, though Margaret was a special favorite of hers, there having sprung up between them one of those friendships which are often so pleasant and helpful, between two girls one of whom is considerably the elder.

Margaret had been one of the very few admitted during that week before the funeral, and Tom had come into the schoolroom one day and found her there with Ann ; and another day he had walked by the side of her horse across the park to the lodge.

On neither of these occasions—nor, I should think, on any other—would an unprejudiced observer have described Margaret Beresford as conventional or affected, still less would he have accused her of possessing that mysterious quality called “side” which produces such an enraging effect on the observer. But on both occasions the effect produced on Tom was distinctly exasperating, and when the day after his return from London Ann

brought her in to lunch, Tom was as nearly discourteous to her as a gentleman could be in his own house.

"I am so sorry you don't like her," Ann said wistfully, as they stood on the steps from which the girl had just ridden off.

And Tom snapped round at her with some of the old schoolboy roughness which had not made its appearance since his return home. "Not like her? What on earth makes you think I don't like her? I wish you would n't take such fancies into your head, Ann. She's a nice enough girl in her way, I've no doubt, though I can't say it's the particular style that takes my fancy. You must n't expect me to swallow all your special favorites whole."

But in spite of this he found himself thinking of Margaret Beresford — of her frank, gracious manners and pleasant voice, and of her courtesy and innate consciousness of what should be said or done. If this was the effect produced by conventionality or acquired by drill in rigid society manners, it was certainly not unpleasing. She was a lady to the fingertips, he grudgingly allowed; and then, mentally, took himself by the collar and shook himself because he involuntarily began a comparison between her and Susie; and then was still more savagely wroth with himself for shrinking from a comparison, when there could be no question which was the prettiest and sweetest and most attractive.

CHAPTER XXIII

A BLOW

Ah well! I could not overstate that woe,
For I have had some blessings, little care;
But since the falling of that heavy blow,
God's earth has never seemed to me so fair,
Nor any of His creatures so divine,
Nor sleep so sweet.—JEAN INGELOW..

“**S**ACRED to the memory of Susan, dearly loved wife of Thomas Bannister of Donnington, who died at New York, March 3, 1885. Aged 22. Behold the lilies of the field.”

The tablet stands in Donnington Church in the chancel opposite the Hall seat, from whence Sunday after Sunday Boy's eyes trace out the letters recording the death of his mother, who, Sunday after Sunday, becomes a more misty, indistinct memory, but always inseparately connected with the madonna lilies, a wreath of which, beautifully carved in white marble, surrounds the legend of the young wife's death. The sad eyes of Boy's father also rest upon it through many excellent doctrinal discourses of the new vicar, which he flatters himself are irresistible to the squire.

The news came the week after Tom's return from London, a week during which he had telegraphed

several times and written by each mail to various places which had occurred to his mind as likely points at which to reach her. What matter if she got them all, and had the same news and the same loving, fond words over and over again?

"Do it again," Boy used to say when any fresh game or trick pleased him; "say it all over again from the very beginning," when some story particularly tickled his fancy. And so it is in the sweet game of love, in the fairy-tale of the heart—it does not pall by repetition or lose its charm with its novelty.

But those fond letters came dropping back, like leaves after a frost, falling, falling, lifeless and dead on Tom's wintry heart, the letters opened no doubt by uninterested officials and scanned by cold, careless eyes, and returned as "not known."

It was an early March evening when the telegram came, the first fine day after a week of rain and raw cold. Tom had taken Boy for a long ramble about the park, a ramble full of interesting events in the shape of rabbits, birds' nests and squirrels, violets and primroses, soft gray velvet buds on the withes and yellow catkins on the hazels. Why, you might walk three days' journey through London, as Jonah did through Nineveh, without finding half the things that Boy carried home in his basket or stored in his memory to tell granny.

The walk had been prolonged by various distractions beyond Boy's ordinary tea-time, and his young legs were a little bit tired, which accounted for his

starting the proposition that Donnington was too big and that it would be nicer if rabbits and squirrels and birds' nests were all near together in a room like Corsham Street.

After this sentiment Tom picked Boy up and carried him, feeling that only great fatigue or want of tea could be any excuse even in the infant mind for such a want of appreciation of such great breezy spaces and blue distances and open expanse of sky.

As they came up to the house Tom saw a telegraph boy coming up the avenue, and despatching Boy to the tea awaiting him in the hall, he stood on the steps till the messenger came up.

No fear or apprehension oppressed him ; he was whistling an air—I think, by the way, it was the very air Susie used to sing at the Caledon—and noticing the low light from the sun striking on the smooth stem of a beech, and bringing out the ruddy color in a Scotch fir. Susie was in his mind, too, and the thought of how he would show her this, that, and the other, and win her to love it all as he did. She had not, perhaps, the same vivid enjoyment of Nature that he had ; now and then she had vexed him with some remark analogous to that despicable suggestion of Boy's inspired by weariness and lack of bread and butter. But Susie would learn, she was so young—not cut-and-dried, or set in the stiff mould of conventionality. (He could not resist even to himself having a hit at poor Margaret Beresford.) “No, thank Heaven ! Susie is so young and impressionable, ‘an unlesson'd girl, unschooled, unpractised.’ ”

Happy in this, she is not yet so old
But she may learn; and happier than this
She is not bred so dull but she can learn;
Happiest of all, is, that her gentle spirit
Commits itself to yours to be directed,
As from her lord, her governor, her king.

He was lingering over this wonderfully true description of his young wife as he took the telegram and searched in his pocket for money to pay the carriage, and then he opened the envelope and read that she was dead.

He must have stood for some time on the steps with the pink telegram paper in his hand and the orange envelope fluttering away from his feet on to the drive, for the light between the trees had turned yellow and red and then deadened and faded before he turned and went into the house.

Boy, in high spirits after tea, was engrossing the attention of his aunts; but Ann noticed Tom's entrance.

"I'm afraid the tea is nearly cold, Tom; will you have some fresh made?"

But Tom passed on into the library, and shut himself in with the telegram. It was from Polly, and ran in the cruelly concise manner of telegrams: "Susie took chill on journey. No danger apprehended till to-day, when end came unexpectedly, 10 A.M. Terrible blow.—WILMOT." And the address of some New York hotel.

It seemed impossible. He sat reading the words over and over again till they lost all meaning. It

could not be true ! Susie dead ! She who was in such sweet young health, who had rarely ailed for a day, who seemed free from all the aches and pains most mortals are a prey to at times ! If it had not been incredible that any one could be so inhumanly cruel, it might have been a practical joke to frighten him. He had heard of Polly being out of health ; indeed, that had been the reason Susie gave for this ill-advised journey. Could it have been a mistake between the two by some extraordinary blunder of the telegraph clerks, or of his poor little Susie in the agitation of the sudden bereavement ?

That would have been bad enough to think, of the child alone and unfriended, and in such grief, and, perhaps, short of money, and not knowing yet that her husband could supply all her needs plentifully and lavishly. But compared with the awful stunning fact of her death, it would have been comfort and consolation to Tom to be on the rack of fear and anxiety about her for all the time that must elapse before he could get to her and take her into his strong, loving protection. He felt he could have defied death itself if he could once have put his arm round her. Oh ! if he had only started off directly he had found she was gone he might have been in time. But no ; at any rate that pang was spared him, for even the quickest passage direct to the place without a moment spared for inquiry or investigation would not have sufficed to bring him in time to take little Susie's dying head on his shoulder as his mother had held his father's, or to hold her poor

little hand when her feet began to stumble on the dark mountains.

His head dropped forward on to the telegram which he had spread out before him on the table, and it was thus that his mother found him when she came into the library half an hour later, his whole attitude expressive of utter hopeless despair, with his arms stretched out across the table and the hands lying nerveless and relaxed — not wrung together in passionate entreaty, but as those of one whose heart-broken supplication had been rejected by a tribunal against which there was no appeal, and who was lying prone under the weight of the blow.

Mrs. Bannister had not been into the library since her husband's death ; each place or face or circumstance that had been familiar to them together had a special little stab for the widowed heart the first time she faced it alone. And so the library, which was the squire's special domain, where he transacted business and did his magisterial work, had been put off to be visited when time might have a little dulled the edge and keenness of the ache.

But that evening a sudden impulse came into her heart to go there, and she got up leaving the work she had in hand, and Ruth who was reading something to her out of the local paper, and the bright glow of the lamp that had just been brought up, and the comfortable fireside, and Boy building a Tower of Babel with the bricks on the rug.

I was going to say it was a strange impulse, but I do not think such things are strange if we recognize

the Authority that says to one, "Go, and he goeth ; and to another, Come, and he cometh ; and to my servant, Do this, and he doeth it." Only the word of command comes in such different ways, and sometimes in the rush and hurry of life we miss it. There must be more quiet in the heart than most of us know nowadays for the ready response to come, " Speak, Lord, for thy servant heareth."

But Mrs. Bannister obeyed the impulse, and went down the dimly lighted staircase (Tom had commented on the need of better lighting when he thought the old home belonged to Donald) and across the hall where the logs had burned dull and ashy and the air was a little chill.

She paused with her hand on the library door before she opened it, with a sharp memory of interviews there, consultations, confidences, and of how her husband would send a servant to say he wanted to speak to her in the library, sometimes interrupting other occupations and arousing momentary irritation at having to leave something that was interesting or important. She was so glad now to think she had never let the summons go unheeded but had always gone at once, to find him awaiting her with that almost childish impatience that could brook no delay. " You're a spoilt child, Tom," she used to say, as she stopped the tattoo he beat on the table with the paper-knife if he was kept waiting.

" It's you that have spoilt me then," he would say, and with pretty old courtesy kiss the hand she laid on his shoulder ; " and I want you specially just now."

He would never want her again she thought sadly as she opened the door of the dark room, where the fire had gone out and the only light came in with her as she entered from the hall, but by that she saw the despairing figure stretched across the writing-table. And then she knew that her husband wanted her there specially just now to be a comfort to Tom.

It was half an hour later that Ann, to her great indignation mixed with admiration, found her mother helping Tom to pack his portmanteau. Helping? No, taking the principal part — folding cloth clothes, that generally insoluble problem to the feminine mind — looking out shirts and counting collars as if she had been used to the duties of a valet all her life.

There was, of course, no reason why Milsom or one of the other men should not have done it, and failing them and the maids, who were always delighted to do anything for the master, Ann herself was close at hand doing nothing but reading a novel at her ease in an armchair, and Sophy and Ruth were likewise quite available.

But when Ann heard the trouble that had befallen — the sudden bolt out of the blue that had crushed Tom — she left mother and son together though her fingers Itched to pack those shirts and collars, and though she saw a little pink flush in her mother's cheeks that Ann knew meant fatigue and a bad night, and though her heart yearned to have a little share if not in the comforting of Tom, at any rate in the helping — the truest love being most ready to keep

out of sight if the best is being done for those they love, caring not a whit who does it.

There was just time to catch the mail-train to Liverpool that evening, and from there Tom was to telegraph for full particulars, and on the receipt of the answer, whatever it was, start by the next boat.

That small forlorn-hope of a mistake in the telegram would not bear even being spoken of to his mother.

"Could there have been any mistake?" one of them said. And they looked into one another's sad eyes, and the answer was a sigh. It was well they did not build an edifice of hope on such poor foundations, for next day Mrs. Bannister received a telegram from Liverpool, "News confirmed. Leaving for New York to-night."

CHAPTER XXIV

A GRAVE

And, when the stream
Which overflowed the soul was passed away,
A consciousness remained that it had left,
Deposited upon the silent shore
Of memory, images and precious things
That shall not die, and cannot be destroyed.

— WORDSWORTH.

TEN years since my last chapter — nearly ten years since that tablet was put up in Donnington Church with the wreath of lilies, and since Tom came back from a long wander in Switzerland with Ann and Boy, to take up his abode at Donnington and the duties of his position.

Boy's memory of his mother is very dim and faint by this time, built up mainly from the lilies round her name, which no doubt were the connecting links with Carlo Dolci's angel of the Annunciation, which came into Boy's mind whenever he thought of his mother, though it was not at all like the enlarged photograph in his father's room, beautifully softened and touched till any character there might have been in the young face was eradicated from the "faultily faultless" exquisite picture.

His father, looking at Boy sometimes, used to think he was the best portrait left him of little Susie ;

though the whole neighborhood confirmed Mrs. Day's opinion expressed when she first saw the child, that Boy was a Bannister from head to foot, and no one could mistake him for anything else.

But Boy looked up at Tom sometimes with Susie's eyes, and the soft coloring of the complexion where it was not tanned by the sun was no Bannister inheritance ; and the tone of his voice would make Tom start sometimes with the pang of vivid remembrance.

Boy was rather ashamed of his white skin, which a Scotch school-fellow used to tease him about as being that of a lassie ; but he did his best by constant exposure to get rid of such a humiliating possession.

Tom used to talk persistently to Boy at first about his dead mother, because there was not another soul at Donnington, with all their tender sympathy, that had seen her and could understand even as much as the child.

And during their walks hand in hand among the hills and valleys of Switzerland, while Ann fell behind to gather flowers, he would pour out memories of days that death had robbed of all their penury and meanness and privation, leaving only the sweetness, simplicity, and tender happiness out of which to weave "Sorrow's crown of sorrow, in remembering happier things."

Boy would agree rapturously with all his father said, now and then contributing some small original recollection of his own, not always, perhaps, quite in harmony with the tone of his father's memories ; but

by degrees Tom became aware that Boy's attention was a little bit strained, and that there was a slight relief evident when the conversation turned to other subjects or Aunt Ann overtook them, or they came to a steep place where the difficulties of the way engrossed their attention.

It vexed him a little when he realized this, but he told himself that it was only natural, and that he was a fool for making what should have been Boy's sweetest memory a bugbear to the child. So he kept it to himself after that, and perhaps thought all the more, as is often the case with a trouble kept out of sight, and especially with frank, open-hearted, communicative natures like Tom's when by force of circumstances outside sympathy and understanding is denied them.

And as time went on he did not talk of Susie to any one but his mother, and that only occasionally, encouraged by the memory of that first evening when the sudden sorrow fell on him, and of her hand on his bowed head and of her words, "My poor Tom, I know what it is for I have just been through it."

But even she could not quite know what he felt, for she had held his father's head on her shoulder and felt the last breath on her cheek; so she could not understand all that Tom suffered, between whom and his wife's deathbed tossed all those miles of troubled, restless gray sea, which in his dreams seemed always to divide them.

Tom had stood in the room where she died, and heard all the sad little details from the kind-faced

hospital nurse who had helped Polly in the care of her, and from the doctor who had attended her.

They had had a very rough voyage ; and Tom remembered, with a sick heart, how the wind had howled round the Hall several nights and buffeted at the windows and scattered the lawns with branches from the elm-trees.

Both girls had suffered severely from sea-sickness and were both of them ill when they landed, and Susie had evidently taken a bad chill.

Tom remembered Susie's poor little wardrobe, and wrung his heart with the thought of insufficient wraps ; and hated himself for feeling so warm and comfortable in his big overcoat.

"She must always have been very delicate," the nurse said pityingly, for the anguish in the tall, handsome young Englishman's face moved her deeply ; "if she had lived she would have been an invalid for the rest of her life."

And he had never noticed it — had always thought of her as beyond the average in health and strength ! He recalled headaches and colds that had, as he thought passed off quicker than other people's, and blamed himself for not having taken more notice of them.

"Dr. Herridge advised a nurse being engaged, for Miss Wilmot was not at all fit to do the nursing ; indeed, I had to nurse the two of them towards the end, but Miss Wilmot did not half like my coming and wanted to do it all herself, when she was hardly able to crawl about. We thought Mrs. Carter — I beg

your pardon, sir, but that was the name she was known by—Mrs. Bannister, I mean, was getting on slowly, and the doctor did not apprehend any immediate danger till the morning of the day she died, when she took a sudden turn for the worse and sank. No, she did not suffer ; she was unconscious towards the end, and just slept away so quietly that Miss Wilmot could not believe she was gone, and kept on saying, ‘Can’t you do something, nurse? Is n’t there something we could give her?’ Poor young lady, she was so broken-hearted I hardly knew what to do with her! If they had been sisters she could not have felt it more.”

Good, kind little Polly! Tom repented in dust and ashes his avoidance of her and the slighting thoughts he had harbored in his mind, and he longed to tell her how grateful he was for her tenderness to his darling, and to let her know that as long as he lived she should never want a friend, and to hear all the details she could give of those few last days and of any words of farewell or parting wishes about himself or Boy. But this he was not able to do in person, as Polly had gone on to join the rest of the company some days before his arrival and as soon as she had recovered enough strength to travel.

“I think,” said the doctor, who also told him all he could of those last days, “that Miss Wilmot was a little bit afraid of meeting you. I gathered that she had been the means of persuading Mrs. Car—Bannister—to accompany her on her journey, and she naturally thought you would blame her for the sad

result, for which, of course, she was in no way responsible ; and she was in such a depressed and nervous condition that I expect the interview would have been very painful and upsetting to both of you, so I did not try to persuade her to wait till your arrival from England. I think, unless it is of paramount importance that you should see her, that it would be kinder not to press for an interview at any rate at present."

So Tom let himself be dissuaded from following Polly to Chicago, having no wish to inflict additional pain on her, and blaming himself too miserably to have any blame to spare for any one else.

The doctor and nurse and the servants at the hotel testified to the care and devoted attention she had shown even when she was so ill herself, and they described the utter prostration of grief that overwhelmed her when the end came ; and the same spoke in every word of the little tear-stained, badly written letter (so piteously like Susie's own letter of farewell) which she had left with the nurse for him, and which was so desperately sad and broken-hearted that he could hardly find it in his heart to complain of its shortness and of how little it told, or think how much rather he would have heard just a word or two that Susie had said than what mainly filled the page — her own sorrow and bitter regret, and entreaties to him to forgive and think kindly of her.

But he treasured that letter for the sake of the postscript — "Susie said she hoped you would not let Boy forget his mother."

He spent hours in the great cemetery by the new grave, and would fain have carried the poor little remains away with him to England to lay her by the old squire under the big yew-tree in Donnington Churchyard.

If he could have done it himself — just taken her in his arms and carried her home, as he remembered doing once in that first year when she had sprained her ankle — he would have liked to think of her being among his own people in death instead of in that wilderness of strangers; but the thought of all the ghastly paraphernalia of undertakers' men, and the conventional outward appearance of respect and mourning concealing what naturally must be to those concerned a mere matter of business, a rather gruesome bit of the day's work to be got through as quickly and cheerfully as decency would allow, made him relinquish the idea.

What did it matter? Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust. What matter if the earth and ashes and dust were American or English? It would be all the same to-morrow, that great, bright to-morrow when the day will break and the shadows flee away and he and Susie be together again.

It was not the same with her as it was with him, in whom the home feeling was so strong that he felt even in death he would sleep the sounder and sweeter with those mellow old bells ringing his lullaby, and the soft shadow of the great yew-tree falling like a blessing on the mossy turf. It was like going to bed at home to Tom, but it would have had no such pleas-

ant, soothing, home-like suggestion to his young wife, who had always loved sunshine better than shade and fresh brightness than sombre age, and to whom Donnington was as strange and unknown as New York.

So he made Susie's grave beautiful and bright with flowers, and made arrangements that it should be kept so; and presently there was a cross of carved and twined lilies after the manner of the stone at Donnington Church, and with the same inscription.

Each year he came to visit it, and once he brought Boy; and then he would find out the nurse and doctor and go over again with them the events of those last days. Each year it was less satisfying and soothing, for every year had taken a little from the vividness of their memory of what took place, as was only to be expected with busy people who, perhaps, every day of their lives touched on sorrows and sufferings as harrowing as that of the young wife's death and her husband's grief.

Life is too busy and bustling everywhere, and perhaps especially so at New York, to allow of any one keeping isolated cases very accurately in mind; and when Tom found that the doctor, with all his kind, sympathetic manner, was mixing up Susie in his memory with a Spanish lady who had died after an accident, he did not feel inclined to trouble him again. The nurse, indeed, was cleverer in concealing slight lapses of memory, but Tom felt uneasily that it was increasingly an effort to her to get up the necessary sympathetic interest which she felt the situation demanded.

Of Polly he heard nothing after that little heart-broken note, though he wrote a long letter thanking her for all she had done, and begging her, when she felt better, to allow him to see her, as she would understand how precious to him was all she would be able to tell him about Susie. He entreated her to let him know what expenses she had incurred on behalf of his wife, as he was most anxious to repay them, though nothing could repay her care and kindness; and he said he hoped she would let him know when she returned to England, as he should be most glad to welcome her to Donnington. She must always feel that she had a friend in him, and remember that if at any time he could be any help or assistance to her he should always be most glad to render it for Susie's sake; and he hoped she would continue to take an interest in Susie's Boy.

But Polly sent no answer; and when Signor Contarini's company returned to England, Miss Wilmot was not among them, and, on inquiry at the Memnon, Tom learnt that she had accepted an engagement in the States.

CHAPTER XXV

TEN YEARS LATER

There may, perhaps, in such a scene
Some recollection be
Of days that have as happy been,
And you 'll remember me.—A. BUNN.

AUGUST at Donnington, with the sun pouring royally down on the golden harvest-fields where the sheaves stand thick awaiting the heavy yellow wagons which come lumbering along to bear them to the jolly big ricks which are growing in the rick-yards of the farms.

Every one is getting burnt a good rich copper color, even the babies only betray vestiges of fairness in the creases of fat legs and arms. Every one lives out of doors from earliest morning till the great, calm harvest-moon sails out from behind the elms and takes all the gold out of the sheaves and stubble-fields and casts long, black shadows, and bids the tired laborers go home to their well-earned rest.

The joy of harvest seems in the air—the hot air that quivers over the stubble and dusty path, and hardly stirs the heavy, dark-green masses of foliage that show no touch of autumn yet but are all rich,

uniform verdure. Up above brood great, soft, fleecy clouds like the broad wings of the creating Spirit blessing the increase of the valleys that stand so thick with corn that they shall laugh and sing.

Harvest comes so very direct from the great Giver that it does not want any explanation to the simplest soul as to Who it is that gives them their meat in due season, or need the faith of seed-time or the greater trust that bitter winter cold and rough winds and fierce storm are only fulfilling His will, Who will presently fill all things living with plenteousness.

Afternoon tea at the Hall is spread in summertime outside the drawing-room windows at the end of the terrace, where a big cedar-tree gives a pleasant shade and yields a warm, spicy fragrance in the afternoon sun.

Mrs. Bannister's chair can be brought here, for she grows more and more of an invalid as she goes down the vale of years, and rarely leaves her room now except to be drawn in her chair up and down the terrace or to join the party at afternoon tea under the cedar.

This afternoon, when we come back to Donnington after our ten years' absence, she has been holding quite a reception in the corner of the terrace, for various callers have dropped in, and Ann is beginning to look a little anxiously at the sweet, old face for signs of fatigue. Ann is still the one to be anxious for every one else, being the only member of the party, she maintains, with a spark of prudence, who thinks of draughts and damp feet, and fetches

little wraps and measures out cunning little remedies for small ailments.

"It's all very well to make fun," she would say, "but I wonder what you would do without a fidgety, old-maid daughter and sister to see after such a scatter-brained lot?" Which was an unanswerable argument, for how Donnington would have got on without her was beyond the power of any one to picture; and Boy could hardly imagine the world going round without the old-maid aunt, who seemed the pivot on which everything turned.

"Married aunts" (Sophy and Ruth had both married in the course of those ten years), he used to declare, "were all very well, but they have such lots of other things to think of—dogs and kids and houses and husbands."

I hope Boy arranged the "other things" at haphazard, and not in order of merit; but I am afraid husbands did not rank very high in his estimation.

I wish that in real life people were accustomed, in ordinary conversation, to give a résumé of family history for the past few years as they do on the stage, and then, by simply recording the talk round the tea-table under the cedar, the reader would be informed of all that had befallen at Donnington during those ten years. But you might listen forever to tea-table chatter without hearing any of the most important family events even alluded to, for the simple reason that every one knows about such events and is aware that the others know all about them.

But in a play Sophy's and Ruth's marriages would have come out casually in conversation, instead of my having laboriously to record the fact; and I dare say that Sophy, sitting there by her mother's side and looking younger and more girlish than she had done at the time of her father's death, and showing no outward manifestation of the married state except the wedding-ring on her slender finger, would have mentioned a few details of her own and Ruth's marriages, and of the number of "kids," irreverently placed by Boy after dogs in his catalogue of impedimenta, they each possessed.

Likewise Boy—sitting there on the balustrade swinging his legs, and with a face sunburnt to a degree highly satisfactory to himself as concealing the effeminate fairness, except when the curls on his forehead were pushed back, as Aunt Ann had a way of doing, to reveal a stripe of lily-white skin —would have told of his being at Eton after some years at a preparatory school, and how he was beginning to distinguish himself at cricket—a fact that a schoolboy would hardly mention on the rack, however much he may hug the pleasant sense of it to his heart in secret. He would have told also that he was popular with both masters and school-fellows, the mention of which would deserve a kicking and infallibly get it if overheard by one of those appreciative school-fellows, while a good snubbing might be equally reckoned on from the master.

Boy is thirteen and tall for his age, and though, as I have said, he was in most respects a Bannister,

there was the touch of his mother which softened a certain ruggedness that was characteristic of his father's family and put a sunny blue into the straight directness of the Bannister eyes, in place of the dark brown of those of Tom and his sisters, and a curl and a touch of sunlight into the hair, and a dimple in the round cheek.

Tom was insanely proud of this young Apollo, and vexed himself very unnecessarily and far more than the sufferer himself over a cut on his forehead that had to be sewn up and left a scar.

Tom, as he lies back in the big garden-chair, is watching him now through half-shut eyes; and as that fact also is not likely to be mentioned in conversation, I had better record here that he has not married again, nor, though various reports have circulated from time to time on the subject, does he seem inclined at present to do so.

Public opinion at once decided that he would speedily find another mate, now that Providence had so opportunely removed the low-born wife whom he had married in a fit of boyish perverseness, an action which nothing would persuade society that he had not bitterly repented ever since.

Tom was irritably conscious that even his kindest and most sympathetic friends regarded Susie's death as the fortunate end of an awkward episode, and viewed any signs of mourning for her as a mere perfunctory tribute of respect to the memory of Boy's mother.

But he could not take up cudgels on Susie's behalf

and declare his undying love and sincere appreciation of his sweet young wife against a feeling he could only guess at, and which no one could have expressed openly to him. It is just these intangible foes that are most difficult to deal with, as you cannot ride full tilt at them and knock them over and have done with them. Perhaps this want of justice to little Susie set Tom more entirely against replacing her—at any rate, time should prove to these incredulous onlookers that anything so sweet and pure and good as his young wife was not so easily forgotten; and the mere suspicion that any one was considered especially suitable for him was enough to nip the faintest beginning of a liking in the bud.

Having his mother and Ann with him was also a powerful deterrent; there was no want felt of a mistress at Donnington, or a mother for Boy. As his mother's strength failed and she became more of an invalid, Ann took her place and became, as I said before, the pivot—very unobtrusive and often overlooked—on which everything turned.

Tom is not very much altered in those ten years. The years between twenty-five and thirty-five do not alter a man as much as they do a woman. He is less of a boy, graver, less excitable; but his face, as he leans back in the shade of the cedar this afternoon, does not look any older and perhaps less careworn than it did when we saw it first under the gas in the little room at Corsham Street, and though he declares that there are gray hairs show-

ing themselves on his close-cropped head, Boy has never been able to discover one, and Ann pooh-poohs the suggestion, though her own hair bears incontestable signs of Time's tender hand.

The only visitor who yet remains, and who lingers on far beyond the orthodox limits of a call, with the air of a privileged person, is Margaret Beresford ; and though, if you look narrowly, you can see that she is not just the young girl who rode Blackbird to the meet at the "Horse-shoes," Time has dealt very gently with her, as he does with wholesome, open-air faces like hers, and her slight, athletic figure is as girlish and, some would say, as angular as ever.

She is Margaret Beresford still, though report says she might many a time have changed her name if she had cared to do so, for besides personal attractions, which are not wanting, she has a tidy little fortune of her own, and will have more when Sir John dies. But she has too many interests in her life, with her horses and dogs, and acting as deputy master of the hounds when Sir John's rheumatism incapacitates him, and the pleasant duties of lady of the manor among the poor people and the schools, to be very keenly on the lookout for what is sometimes the only interest in a woman's life ; so perhaps she lets the incipient beginnings of love passages pass unnoticed, and does not coax and cherish the little flame till it shines forth in Hymen's torch.

And then, too, she is too much of a good comrade with the men she meets, natural and simple and friend-

ly. No one would think of paying her a compliment, except in a roundabout way by praising her horse; and yet I do not fancy the roughest of the men she comes across in the hunting field ever forgets that she is a lady, or would presume on her easy good-fellowship.

Perhaps this is the explanation of Margaret Beresford remaining unmarried; she is, as one of her hunting friends said, "such a good fellow," and I do not think men care for a good-fellow for a wife. And then, too, I think her friendship for Ann supplies the spice of romance that is wanting in every woman's life. Let people say what they will about schoolgirl friendships — they are a very useful outlet for young sentiment, and often save a premature plunge into silly, juvenile flirtation, taking the bloom off the fair peach of real first love.

Ann was so boundlessly sympathetic, and would listen with untiring interest to the girl's ideas on various subjects — would discuss the last book from the library, or the texture of the flannel for Margaret's mother's meeting, or the new pointing of the Psalter in the village church, or what could be done for some hopeless ne'er-do-weel who weighed heavily on the girl's heart. She would even enter with enthusiasm into all the details of a splendid run with the hounds, though Ann was timid herself on anything except her old pony, and cherished a lurking pity for the poor, straining, draggled fox with such desperate odds against his ever getting home to his snug earth again.

Tom had almost entirely got over his objection to Margaret Beresford, which, after all, was only a prickly sort of resentment against imaginary comparisons of her and Susie to the advantage of the former. But you cannot ride side by side with a girl across country and share good runs and bad, and get wet through together, and give her a lead now and then, and see her take fences like a bird, and shout advice to her and see that she had sense enough to take it (there is nothing convinces a man of a girl's sense so conclusively as seeing her take his advice), and that she had pluck enough to carry her through most things, and then to jog home together, sometimes for a good many miles, muddy and cold and tired and yet not a bit cross — a man cannot do all this through ten hunting seasons without getting a good notion of a girl's character, sufficient anyhow to disabuse his mind of his erroneous first impression of her as a conventional, affected, fine lady.

If Margaret Beresford had not been so patently the right person for him to marry, and the very first that the country round allotted to him and continued to allot every time (and it was not seldom) the force of circumstances threw them together, I think that perhaps Tom might have mechanically walked, or trotted, or galloped or even leaped into a marriage with her, and perhaps all the more so as, though she was no fine lady or extra elegant, she was altogether the opposite of Susie in every way, so that there was no comparing the two. It would have been as absurd as

to compare summer and winter, or, perhaps, more aptly, spring and autumn, or a tender June rose with a well-grown, vigorous holly-bush.

He was thinking something of this sort that very afternoon as his half-closed eyes took in her figure as well as Boy's.

She and Boy were great friends; indeed, in his earlier days, when he found out that there would be objections to his marrying Aunt Ann, he had selected Margaret for his future wife without a moment's hesitation, though all the young ladies in the neighborhood were his devoted slaves, and this partiality of Boy's would have been greatly in Margaret's favor if Tom had been anxious to give Boy a stepmother or she to undertake the office.

She was in her riding-habit this afternoon, though that she was most days winter or summer; but she had taken off her hat and was resting her smooth, dark head back against the ivy-covered balustrade on which Boy was perched, and looking up at him with those nice, honest brown eyes that no one would have called handsome — indeed, you did not think if they were handsome or not but only of what they said, and that was always the truth whatever the subject might be.

She was not generally elegant; indeed, Mrs. Bannister would sometimes animadvert in a kindly way against her ungainly, brusque movements; but now and then by accident — it was always accidental, for Margaret's grace was never studied — as now, the slight, athletic figure in its well-fitting habit looked



She was resting her smooth, dark head back against the ivy-covered
balustrade on which Boy was perched.

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graceful, and on horseback it never looked otherwise.

She and Boy made a pretty contrast — he so fair in his white flannels, and she so dark in her green habit — and not only Tom's half-shut eyes noticed it but Ann's also ; and when the two strolled off together in the direction of the stables, her arm round his neck and his round her waist, Ann's eyes followed them lovingly, and then met Tom's with a meaning that at once set him on his guard.

“ Wants a new riding-habit, does n't she ? ” he said with that provokingness which men put on as a protection against even kindly probing of inner feelings. “ And I wish Boy would not sit on the wall ; just look at his trousers ! ”

And Ann gave a little sigh, perhaps it was for the green stain on Boy's trousers or perhaps it was for a cherished scheme of hers that did not seem to ripen in the most favorable circumstances, but which she knew enough of the ways of mankind in general not to attempt to help forward even by a movement of her little finger.

It is easier to drive a pig along a plank, which is a feat next-door to the impossible, than to induce a man to marry the wife every one would like for him and that he would half like to marry himself.

Other eyes, too, had noticed Margaret and her devoted young swain, and perhaps Ann's wish was echoed in another heart that would fain have seen her son's wife before she said her *Nunc dimittis* ; but Mrs. Bannister had had more experience in such

matters than Ann had, and the old eyes were more under command, and there certainly was a touch of the wisdom of the serpent mixed with the gentleness of the dove, or why otherwise should she have begun when Ann and Sophy had gone into the house, and she and Tom were alone to make disparaging remarks about their late visitor.

"It's a pity Margaret Beresford is so awkward."

"Well, would you call her so? She looks uncommonly well on horseback."

"Ah, perhaps that's just it. A girl who looks well on horseback hardly ever looks well off it."

"Hum — m — m," said Tom dissentingly. "I was only just thinking that she did not look bad sitting against the balustrade."

"She looks older," went on the old lady, who seemed in an unusually carping mood, being generally very gentle in her criticisms. "All that hunting and being out in all weathers ages a girl."

"Think so?" said Tom, with the sound of dissent in his voice.

"Well, you see, Margaret's hardly to be called a girl now. She's getting on — let me see, she must be over thirty. I remember going to see her when she was only a few weeks old and taking you, a little fellow of five, and showing her to you. Dear, dear! What a fuss they made over that child. Of course it was very natural, for there was a good deal of property concerned."

"Harry's a good bit younger?" said Tom.

"Oh, yes; it was six years, I think, before there

was another, and little miss seemed likely to be a big heiress."

"It's a pity she was n't the boy and he the girl. He's rather a muff."

"And you don't think it matters so much a girl being a muff? Well, I don't know, but I think men prefer girls who are muffs, and that is why Margaret has never married. Well, I dare say they are quite right; and she would not have made a comfortable sort of wife."

"I don't know about that," said Tom reflectively. And then, looking up quickly, he detected a little laugh just vanishing from her lips and eyes, and turned on her in pretended wrath. "You're a wicked, deceitful old Jesuit, and I know very well what is in that bad, sly old heart of yours. You know all the time that Margaret is a prime favorite of yours, and you don't think her awkward or old or uncomfortable, so it's no use pretending. But, mater," and his voice dropped to the quieter tone it always had when he spoke of his dead wife, "I don't think I've forgotten little Susie yet; and besides, I don't imagine Margaret has any idea of such a thing in her sensible head, or is to be had for the asking even if I felt inclined to ask her, which I don't."

"Of course she's not," Mrs. Bannister said very decidedly, being too loyal to her sex to allow, as many a fond mother does, that her son has only to drop the handkerchief among the crowd of aspirants for his hand. "She might have married over and over again if she had liked; and it's a good thing she

does not take your fancy for I don't think you would have had much chance with her."

And Tom heartily agreed; but I do not think Mrs. Bannister really believed what she said, and, without being a conceited puppy, I do not think Tom quite did either.

CHAPTER XXVI

HISTORY REPEATING ITSELF

As in a theatre, the eyes of men,
After a well-graced actor leaves the stage,
Are idly bent on him that enters next,
Thinking his prattle to be tedious. — SHAKESPEARE.

IT was a few days after this that Tom came in one afternoon from a magistrates' meeting — I do not think that I have mentioned that he was a J. P. — and Boy, in a somewhat disconsolate condition, met him.

It appeared that Margaret had come over on purpose, Boy said, to play tennis with him — for were they not going to play in a tournament next week together, and was it not therefore necessary that they should practise every spare minute before the eventful day?

But before they had played one set Aunt Ann had come along by the tennis-lawn. "I know she was busy," Boy said; "there were half a dozen poor people she was going to see, and now it is cooler and she can walk better she said she must make up for the hot weather, when she couldn't go. And Margaret called out to her that she had something she wanted to talk to her about, and just dropped her racket and went off, and there they have been

the whole afternoon walking up and down by the kitchen garden-wall talking, and when I called Margaret, she just shouted out 'All right! I'm coming directly,' and I've been fooling about all alone waiting, and now it's tea-time, and she'll have to go off directly after tea because she told me she had some engagement. I might have gone to that cricket match at Postham if I'd known."

"So you might," said Tom. "Why did n't you?" Boy was very suggestive of his mother when he was in a grumbling mood, which was not very often, and the memory of her often prevented Tom from administering the snubbing which might have been beneficial to Boy, who stood a rare chance of being spoilt, only being saved therefrom by being of a naturally happy, sunshiny disposition not inclined to be selfish or bumptious. "I don't mind having a game with you after tea."

But Boy still looked a little bit injured, for his father's tennis playing was of a rough-and-ready description as the game used to be when it first came in, and not of that scientific sort that made playing with him good practice for a tournament; though at other times Boy much enjoyed the lively and somewhat irregular game, hitting very hard and getting very hot over it and laughing a great deal, instead of the serious and deadly earnest of a game with more skilled antagonists.

"Here, you may as well take Harkaway round to the stables as Joe is not here. I'm sorry your Aunt Ann should have had all her afternoon spoilt like

this, but I'll be bound she did n't give a thought to all her plans being upset. Ah! Boy, it ought to be a liberal education to you and me living under the same roof with Aunt Ann."

Boy looked a little thoughtful as he rode off on Harkaway to the stables, but it was evident he had understood his father's indirect reproof, for nothing more was heard of his wasted afternoon, and he was more than usually devoted to Aunt Ann when she came in from her long confabulation with Margaret. Tom even overheard him volunteering to carry a basket with some invalid delicacy in it to Mrs. Pither, an old woman to whom Boy had a special aversion as she had a prickly beard, took snuff, and wished to kiss him whenever ill-chance threw him in her way.

Tom resisted the inclination to say that one of the maids could take it and that Boy could come and play tennis with him, feeling that making *l'amende honorable* in any way has a salutary effect.

Boy confessed to him afterwards that he cautiously opened the cottage door, knowing that the old lady was deaf, and deposited the basket on the table while her back was turned and then fled as fast as his legs could carry him, which was, perhaps, reducing the *amende* to the very lowest terms possible; and then to come back chuckling over the joke rather upset Tom's intention of wholesome discipline.

The days when Ann used to watch over Boy's

infant slumbers and stop for a confidential chat with Tom when he came up to bed, were long since past. Boy's bed-time in the holidays was not settled by the laws of the Medes and Persians, and sometimes Ann would discover him at most unseemly hours curled up in a big armchair in the smoking-room talking to his father, and would shake a disapproving head at him; or, worse still, hear the two culprits tiptoeing carefully upstairs at a still later hour, betrayed to wakeful ears by creaking boards, which in the daytime are discreetly silent but become treacherous in the dead of night.

But to-night, perhaps owing to the idea of salutary discipline pervading the air, Tom despatched Boy to bed at the end of a game of Halma, in which he had been beaten, which made it all the harder for him to retire without the chance of retrieving his fortunes.

Tom, however, was obdurate, and so later, when Ann came into the smoking-room, she found Tom alone.

The window was open, and the big round harvest-moon was shining serenely over the heavy, dark masses of the trees directly opposite the window, casting a sharp, black shadow across the room of the heavy Queen Anne frame; for Tom had turned out the lamp and drawn his chair into the window, and was sitting, after the manner of men when at ease, with his feet rather higher than his head on the window-ledge.

The lusciously sweet scent of tobacco plants at

night came in through the window, penetrating even through the aroma of their foreign relations in Tom's pipe. Now and then a bat flickered past with its eerie, uncanny flight, or an owl called its soft, melancholy "Tu-whoo ! Tu-whoo !" — which Shakespeare was surely mistaken in calling a merry note as well as in counting the "Tu-whit" as part of the same cry, as it is certainly quite distinct, and expressive either of the excitement of the chase or of anger.

The most matter-of-fact of us are apt to feel a little sentimental in the moonlight ; but it is funny, sometimes, even in moments of very real and intense sentiment, what a mixture of commonplace comes in. I fancy it is only poets who can keep the feelings strung up to concert-pitch all the time.

Tom was no poet, so his thoughts alternated strangely. First of all he was full of memories of a moonlight night long ago, early in that honeymoon which seemed to Tom to have lasted all through their short married life — a night when he and Susie hand in hand had watched the silver line rippling to their feet across the sea.

That was an accountable memory enough ; but why should he the next minute have been remembering a peculiar sort of Irish stew they used to have in Corsham Street ? or what could have been the connecting thought that led from one to another.

And then his thoughts were back at Susie's grave and the carved lilies bathed in soft moonlight ; and, hey presto ! they were entirely occupied with a hole

in his glove, which he had forgotten to ask Ann to mend.

When Ann came in, he was actually thinking of Margaret Beresford ; but whether he reached her by way of the Irish stew or the moon-lit grave or the hole in his glove, I cannot determine.

He was thinking, with a little amused smile, of his mother's deceptive behavior, pretending to speak disparagingly of the girl to make him take up the cudgels on her behalf. When a matter is entirely out of the question, as was this one of his marrying Margaret Beresford, it is rather amusing to let one's mind dwell on it and imagine how it would have affected one's self or other people if it had been within the bounds of possibility.

Boy would have been well pleased ; there could be little doubt about that, for he and Margaret were such great friends.

And just then Ann came in, and Tom moved his feet to allow of her sitting in the window-seat, as it was plain she had come for a confabulation.

“Tom, I want to consult you about something.”

“You have me at your mercy.”

“Margaret was here this afternoon.”

“So I heard from Boy.”

“Ah ! poor Boy ! I’m afraid he was disappointed, but — ”

“Do him good ; we’re spoiling the young monkey.”

“We won’t ever do that, Tom !” Ann’s gentle voice sounded as decided and sharp as if she were not the prime mover in the spoiling process. Tom

laughed. "Oh, yes, I know I do; but it's cruel kindness, is n't it? One can see that in other people's cases plain enough; and, after talking to Margaret this afternoon, I was fit to go straight off and beat Boy just to prove that he was not in danger of being spoilt like Harry Beresford."

"Was she talking of that young hero all the time you were walking up and down by the wall, making Boy so desperately impatient?"

"Yes; they are anxious about him."

"What has he been up to?"

Ann hesitated, partly because so much had been told her in confidence and partly because there was a curious similarity between the story she had heard that afternoon and one of fourteen years ago, which had concerned the Bannister family very nearly.

"I asked Margaret if I might tell you, and she did not mind, and I thought that perhaps you might help. You see, Sir John thinks such a lot of Harry, and he's an old man and gets in such an excited condition if anything worries him; so Margaret keeps all she can away from him."

"Well, what has the young scapegrace been about? I've not seen him about anywhere lately."

"No; he's been yachting with some friends of his."

"And got sea-sick?"

"No, Tom; don't laugh. Margaret is really anxious."

"Well, what about? I can't sympathize with her anxiety till I know."

"He made the acquaintance of a—a—lady—an American."

"Oh—h—h!" Tom laughed. "It's a flirtation, is it, and a fair American? My dear Ann, I should have thought Miss Beresford was wise enough to know that it is better not to interfere in a young fellow's flirtations, and if she's going to begin that sort of work with Master Harry, I should say, from the little I've seen of the young gentleman, she would have her hands full."

The moonlight takes the color out of everything, or else Tom would have seen the flush in Ann's face as she said, "She's an actress, Tom."

What a protection a pipe is in awkward junctures of conversation. Tom's pipe drew rather hard just then, and excused him from anything but a little nondescript sort of grunt in reply that might have had any or no meaning; while Ann, who had no such protection, was obliged to hurry on with words that were not at all what she had intended to say, and that sounded to her own irritated ear as if she were condemning the whole theatrical profession and casting a slur on a memory very dear to him, when she dwelt on the fact that this one in particular was of irreproachable character, as if it were altogether an exceptional case.

"She is a very quiet, nice sort of person from all accounts."

"Harry's accounts?"

"Oh, of course; he is quite infatuated about her. But Margaret has heard the same from other sources,

and there does not seem a word against her—only—”

“Well?”

“She seems to have taken a fancy to Harry, and of course it is very flattering to him as she will not have anything to do, as a rule, with other men. She must be a good deal older than he is, Margaret thinks, and a clever sort of woman. I believe she's an excellent actress, so what she can see in poor Harry I can't imagine.”

“I don't think it's difficult to imagine,” said Tom shortly.

“You mean the money and position. Well, it may be so, of course, and, if it is, it is a poor lookout, for they were thrown together so much at Cowes; and now she has gone back to London, Harry is there too and is constantly in her company, and he never misses a night at the Memnon to see her act.”

“At the Memnon! What's her name?”

“Margaret could not remember; but she's an American, and has only lately come to England.”

There was silence then for a minute or two which Tom broke with an odd little laugh. “It's a curious coincidence—isn't it, Ann?—that two such parallel cases should occur at Donnington and Rendle.”

“They're not parallel,” protested Ann stoutly.

“Don't you think so? I think most people would say they were remarkably so. But, Ann, my dear, I don't quite see what help I could be to the Beresfords in their distressing circumstances. I think I'm about the last person they should come to. Suppose I

were idiot enough to interfere in that young fool's affairs and point out to him the error of his ways, I think it would be a case of the pot and the kettle, and he would have a perfect right to kick me for my impudence. And it's not, you see, Ann, as if I could draw a wholesome moral from my own egregious mistake and bid him take warning by me. I should be bound in honesty to confess that I don't consider I made any mistake, and that, if I had my time over again, I should do exactly the same. No; I think you and Margaret Beresford had better keep me out of the calculation altogether, as I might cast my weight on the wrong side of the balance."

Ann had made several ineffectual attempts to edge in a word of deprecation and explanation, but did not get a chance till now.

"Harry thinks so much of your opinion."

"My dear child, Heaven help your innocence! When a man is once in love or fancies himself so, he will snap his fingers in the face of a whole regiment of Solomons. No; I don't think I'll meddle, thank you." And then, seeing the distressed look in Ann's little white face in the moonlight, he added in kinder tones, "I'm awfully sorry, Sister Ann, but I don't see how I can help. I tell you what I could do though — if the lady's acting at the Memnon I could find out what's thought of her there, for I used to know one or two fellows there."

And then Ann went sorrowfully away, feeling her failure was due to her awkwardness, and that any one with more tact would have gained a powerful

helper in Tom for this silly, feather-brained young fellow who had fallen into the toils of a designing adventuress.

And Tom sat on in the moonlight, no longer placid or inclined to sentiment but irritably reflecting on Harry Beresford's folly. Is anything so irritating as seeing our own conduct reflected in others? It seems like a caricature or travesty, and you have not the relief of criticism or blame; it is like making a disparaging remark about some one opposite to you, and then becoming conscious that it is your own reflection in a mirror that you have been contemplating.

"What a young fool Harry Beresford must be to ruin his prospects!" And Tom unwillingly remembered another young fool fourteen years ago. "He's hardly more than a boy, and doesn't know his own mind!" Six years younger than Margaret, his mother had said, and she just thirty. There was a boy of twenty, fourteen years ago, who thought he knew his own mind very well.

"His father so old and thinks such a lot of him!" So did the squire of Donnington of his son.

"You might as well whistle to the wind as give advice to such a young idiot!" Quite true, as Tom himself had shown his friends.

Tom was no more willing to confess that he had been in the wrong now than he had been any time the last fourteen years; but it gave him a fidgety sense of discomfort, as if he were being made ridiculous.

When he got up to go to bed and struck a match

to light his candle, he took up the newspaper from the table and turned to the theatrical notices, and ran his eye down till it came to the Memnon.

Which of the actresses there might be Harry Beresford's charmer? The first name in the list was, Miss May Primrose.

Then it was Polly!

CHAPTER XXVII

A VISIT TO LONDON

Fond memory brings the light
Of other days around me;
The smiles, the tears,
Of boyhood's years,
The words of love then spoken.—MOORE.

DURING the days that followed Tom was sorely distracted, and even Boy, through all the excitement and delight of his first experience of partridge shooting, saw that there was something amiss, and that his companion across the sunny stubble-fields and dewy turnips was often thinking of something else than the splendid working of the pointers, and had to call back his thoughts with difficulty and not always quite quickly enough, when the covey rose with a whirr that set Boy's pulses beating and represented the supreme moment of existence.

And in the evening, in the smoking-room, when Boy was fighting his battles over again as youthful sportsmen love to do, more than once he found that his usually attentive and sympathetic listener was answering at random; and as partridge shooting was just then the one subject with Boy of all-engrossing interest, he felt that something must be

seriously wrong with the pater if he were indifferent to it.

Tom, even with his gun raised to his shoulder and his eye mechanically taking aim, was frequently quite oblivious as to what he was about, though even so his shots did more to fill the game-bag than Boy's with all his concentrated attention.

At the very critical moment, perhaps, Tom was weighing for the hundredth time the desirability of interfering in this business of Harry Beresford's or letting it alone. History was repeating itself in a most vexatious and annoying way.

Why, supposing Susie had lived and had wished, as very probably she would, to have Polly to visit her, and through this means young Beresford had met Polly, all the world would have said it was his fault, and he would have felt desperately guilty in the matter.

And here, when he believed the girl to be in America, and had not seen nor heard of her since Susie's death, she had suddenly reappeared on the scene and touched again on the circle of Tom's life — such a small, quiet, out-of-the-way country circle, you would have thought the chance of their ever coming into contact again was infinitely remote. Was the world so small that the atoms could not help jostling up against one another?

And even supposing a curious chance had brought Polly and Harry Beresford together at Cowes, what extraordinary caprice could have made the successful actress notice a silly, feather-headed young fellow?

Or how did she guess that there was a fortune in prospect to gild the pill?

And Polly had not struck him in old days as that sort. With all her faults she was not designing, and she cared more for a bit of fun and amusement than for getting in with rich people and feathering her nest.

Of course ten years in the States might have altered all that; but Polly must be a good deal changed to make up to a young ass like that. And she was years older than he was. Well, at any rate, that was one point where the cases were not parallel, and Tom remembered Susie's sweet, girlish grace and compared it in imagination with Polly's, by this time, mature charms, which had never been of the refined tender order of Susie's, and which must have become hardened and coarsened by the years in the glare of the footlights. The testimony to her respectability and irreproachable character Tom was glad to hear, and could quite believe it to be true from all he remembered Susie telling him about her in old days. But the thought of Polly, touched up and effective, with a veneer of elegance and refinement laid on over her vulgar, honest little nature, brought home in triumph to Rendle Court as the bride of that young jackanapes, and assuming at once all the airs and graces of a country magnate, revolted Tom to the utter obliteration of several brace of partridges and Boy's enthusiastic harangues.

At another time the affair struck him from another point of view. Suppose that idea which his mother

had so deceptively suggested, and which lurked so unmistakably in Ann's inmost heart, had come to pass, and Margaret Beresford had become his wife, Polly would have been doubly connected with him; and with what face could he have opposed the match or objected to his first wife's cousin as his sister-in-law?

There was a mocking irony in fate's dealings with him that was inexpressibly trying. He could not hit out in any direction without striking at himself or at the memory dearer than himself; it was like seeing himself reflected in a convex mirror, distorting and caricaturing and yet a reflection after all.

Should he write to Polly? If he did, what right had he to interfere in any way, or what could he say?

He had thought in those first sad days of Susie's loss, when Death's tender hand had smoothed out class distinctions and made any one who had been good to Susie the most acceptable company to his aching heart, that when Polly came back to England he should love to have her at Donnington on a visit and make her happy and comfortable, and please her in every way for Susie's sake. He almost exulted in the idea that she might shock some of the stiff, conventional, old-fashioned country neighbors, and felt that it would be a sort of satisfaction to present her little *outré*, touched-up person as "my wife's cousin." It would be like making a kind of reparation for his little unacknowledged disloyal thoughts of Susie.

But now if he wrote, he could hardly offer her the

hospitality he had intended without grievously and naturally offending his old friends the Beresfords, and since Ann's confidential talk in the moonlight he could no longer plead ignorance ; and the shock which his introduction of her might cause in his circle of friends as "my wife's cousin," would no longer be an act of reparation to Susie but a bitter vexation to the Beresfords as Harry's fiancée.

And how could he write cordially and gratefully, as he still honestly wished to do, without inviting her to the Donnington Hall stamped in large, distinct letters on the notepaper, or express a wish that she should see Susie's Boy without giving her a chance of doing so? It would be such palpable humbug that Polly would see through it at a glance, as she had that day when he had passed in the street, pretending to be quite absorbed in steering Boy in his scarlet coat along the muddy pavement. No ; if he could not write freely and frankly he would not write at all, and Polly must think him ungrateful and forgetful if she pleased. He fretted and fumed at these imaginary thoughts of Polly's, not considering that Polly had never let him know, as he had earnestly desired her to, when she returned to England, and had made no reply to the letter he had written after Susie's death.

Ann made no further reference to the Beresfords' anxieties, and I dare say it was only Tom's uneasy feelings that made him fancy there was a slight constraint in Margaret's manner towards him and a semi-reproachful look in her eyes, and that it was intentional

her riding home from cub-hunting by another way so that they did not return in company.

Boy also complained that Margaret was more taken up with other things than usual, and that it was awfully hard lines when a fellow's holidays were nearly over.

It was when Boy's holidays came to an end, and he and Tom were travelling up to London, that a solution of the difficulty about Polly occurred to Tom's mind.

Boy and Tom generally spent a night in London to gild the pill of going back to school — which is a pill, even when Eton and not "Do-the-boys Hall" is in question, and is apt to bring a thickness in the throat and a pricking in the eyes even of men of thirteen, who would indignantly deny that babyish weakness gave rise to these symptoms.

It was an alleviation to do a theatre on the way, and expend the money that flowed a little too liberally at farewell interviews with granny and aunts ; and sometimes the visit included a call on the dentist or tailor, which can scarcely be reckoned as gilding of the pill for a patient of thirteen, though the tailor might be counted so a few years later in life.

Tom was scanning the theatrical notices to select the entertainment for the evening, when the Memnon caught his eye, with Miss May Primrose's name in somewhat larger type than the other performers.

"By Jove!" he said, "we'll go to the Memnon."

Now Boy had set his affections on something of a more decidedly comic description ; but as it was

generally left entirely to his selection, and he strongly suspected that his father was equally bored by tragedy or comedy, pantomime, melodrama or farce, and endured it merely on his account, he could not object when Tom expressed quite a lively desire to go somewhere, though a drama of modern life with a good deal of what Boy called "love-making and stuff," was not a very attractive entertainment. However, he concealed his feelings and agreed to the Memnon, and was rewarded for the sacrifice by the proposal of a fellow-passenger, with whom Tom was acquainted, that Boy should join his party for a matinée of the very comic opera after which Boy's inner man was yearning.

So Tom and Boy parted at Euston, Tom undertaking to get tickets at the Memnon and meet Boy for dinner beforehand at the Criterion. And so Tom, having deposited their traps at their hotel, betook himself to the well-remembered box office of the Memnon, and as he pushed open the swing-door found himself face to face with a large photograph of — Susie !

His heart seemed to stop beating and his head swam, so that he jostled clumsily against a gentleman who was just coming out of the office, and who used unparliamentary language about his awkwardness.

It required a vigorous effort to pull himself together to bring his common-sense to bear and to meet those plaintive eyes that seemed to seek his with a tender appeal, and to realize that they were

not Susie's eyes looking across the dark river of death, full of memory and eloquent meaning, but Polly Wilmot's eyes, most likely touched up and powerfully assisted by art (for Polly's eyes were her weakest point), and the look carefully acquired to fetch—yes, that was just the expression—to fetch the enthusiastic audience across the footlights and turn the heads of young fools like Harry Beresford.

He sat down on the bench opposite the photograph and set his teeth and forced himself to look with cold criticism at the picture, and notice, what surely must be only too apparent on closer inspection, the points of dissimilarity between the cousins, for he had never thought there was the slightest likeness between them, and to detect the trickery and stageposing that all these theatrical portraits possess.

A few minutes later he found himself still gazing with a sort of fascination at those appealing eyes, and recalling that last day in Corsham Street when those eyes kept so persistently from meeting his. And then, by some strange sequence of thought, he was protesting to himself and to those pathetic eyes that, though he liked Margaret Beresford well enough, he had never—never—never had a thought of putting her in Susie's place.

And then he became aware that the clerk in the booking-office was watching him with interest slightly mixed with amusement. He remembered in old days people declaring that the two girls were wonderfully alike, and he had always stoutly combated the idea;

but there must have been a foundation for their opinion, for even now that he was calmer and had realized that it was only a curious family likeness, it gave him a thrill when he caught sight of the photograph again after turning away from it.

It looked older than Susie, and the outline of the cheek was not so round and girlish, and he was obliged reluctantly to confess that there was more expression in the mouth and eyes than his child-wife — his baby-sweetheart as he loved to call her — ever possessed. But time, and, no doubt, a very judicious photographer, must certainly have done much for Polly Wilmot, though time is not often credited with being a benefactor to female beauty.

Well, he would judge for himself that evening, and no doubt the original would soon sweep away all these fancies and he would be ready again positively to declare that there was no likeness between them. But, anyhow, he would try and get a copy of that photograph for the sake of its likeness to Susie.

"Stalls for to-night? Not one to be had for a fortnight; no, nor dress-circle either." The clerk did not think there was a place to be had in the house that night. "And the people are collecting already at the pit entrance."

Tom stood for a minute outside the office door surveying the endless stream of traffic in the street and the hurrying passers-by on the pavement, with the appreciation that only country people have of the wonderful surging tide of human life in London,

which Londoners take for granted, being, of course, part of the tide themselves. He was watching the bustle and stir with the strange, eerie feeling of one who has seen a ghost, after which all the world seems unreal and far off, so intensely real and near is that spiritual world at which we so often jest.

As he stood there the clerk came out of the office with an envelope in his hand. "Look here," he said, "I have just had two stalls for to-night returned. I tell you it's a lucky chance. I've refused twenty or more to-day. But there they are if you like to take them—third row 46-47, nearly in the centre."

And so Tom turned back into the fascination of those haunting eyes, and paid for the tickets, which the clerk handed him in the same envelope in which they had been returned. And on that envelope there happened to be an address written which caught Tom's eye before he stowed it away in his pocket, "Miss Wilmot, 49 Cathcart Mansions, South Kensington."

A couple of hours yet before he should meet Boy at the Criterion. He would go and call on Polly.

CHAPTER XXVIII

A CALL

How do lovers live
When apart?
O, with half a life,
Half a heart.—K. TYNAN.

A FLAT on the fourth floor of one of those big blocks that are springing up all over London. Tom, as he went up in the lift, wondered how any one could make up his mind to live cooped up in a house within a house, without any outlet of any sort, without even a roof above one's head or a solid inch of earth beneath one's feet that one could call one's own.

All remembrance of the intervention that had been asked of him in the matter of Harry Beresford had faded from his mind, and he was thinking only of Susie and of old days, and of the little grave at New York. But his thoughts were brought back abruptly to Ann's request and Margaret's wistful looks as he stepped out of the lift at the fourth floor, by the sight of a man coming out of the door to the left. It was Harry Beresford.

The two men recognized one another simultaneously, and, of the two, I think Tom looked the most embarrassed.

If they had met even at the bottom of the staircase, they might have passed one another with a mere salutation, "Hullo, Beresford, how are you?" "Did n't know you were in town, Bannister."

But there was no mistaking that Tom was making for the place which Beresford had just left, and if he had been a minute sooner might have slipped in at the door before it closed behind Harry Beresford.

"You're going to see Miss Wilmot?" Harry said a little shamefacedly. "I've just been calling there myself."

"I thought of leaving a card," Tom replied sulkily. "She is an old acquaintance of mine; indeed, a cousin of my wife's."

"She will be awfully pleased to see you," Harry said, with a certain little bitter intonation which caught Tom's ear and conveyed the idea that Miss Wilmot was not invariably pleased to see others. "She is always talking about you."

"Ah—h?" said Tom indifferently. "I conclude she is at home."

And Harry disappeared down the lift, and Tom rang the door-bell.

"What a boy he is!" he thought. "I believe he's jealous of me, though I should n't have thought Polly would be likely to talk much in my favor. He looked as if I were going into Paradise and he descending into the Inferno. Well, I expect I felt something like it myself in those old days, and was fit to cut any one's throat who looked twice at Susie. But bless my heart! — the difference! It's

hard to think that any one can feel the same for a hard little painted-up person whose graces are all acquired.—Is Miss Wilmot at home?” And he gave his card to an elaborate parlor-maid with a huge fringe and white streamers, who forthwith ushered him into the little drawing-room.

A pretty little room, as he was able to observe, for he waited for some ten minutes undisturbed and took stock of his surroundings. A little tea-table stood by the hearth where two had apparently been having tea snugly together by the fire — where two comfortable armchairs were still in friendly proximity — and a large white Persian cat purred on the rug, with an empty saucer by his side, indicating the source of his content. Just the sort of cat Susie would have liked. Tom remembered one just like this, only not so snowy-white, at the milk-shop round the corner at Corsham Street, which was a constant subject of envy.

It was curious how many things in the room suggested Susie to his mind. Of course it was only the consciousness that it was her cousin’s room that made him quick to take account of trifles that otherwise would have gone unnoticed.

The room were full of pretty things — pictures and flowers and dainty knick-knacks — things that his little wife had never had the chance of gathering round her, and he thought bitterly of the bare, dreary little rooms at Corsham Street. So why should this pretty room remind him of Susie so curiously when the more stately, old-fashioned elegance of Donnington failed to do so? To be sure,

on the writing-table Boy's baby face smiled out of an elaborate silver frame. Susie must have given it to her, or perhaps it was the very one Susie used to cherish in a little shabby leather frame, a double frame containing also a very boyish likeness of himself taken in his early undergraduate days at Oxford. His eye involuntarily turned to the corresponding frame on the other side, though it was unlikely that Polly would honor his likeness with a place on her writing-table though she might do so with Susie's boy. But a bouquet of flowers, no doubt an offering from that ass Beresford, had overturned the photograph with its Maréchale Niel roses and heliotrope, and Tom's curiosity was not sufficient to induce him to raise the flowers to see whose portrait it was.

He began to get a little impatient at the delay and got up and looked out of the window at the houses opposite, wondering how people could endure the monotony of such an outlook in place of the ever-varying face of nature, with its endless succession of lights and shadows and changing tints. He compared the dingy brick and smoky windows with the big Scotch fir opposite one of his bedroom windows, with its scarred trunk so ruddy on wet mornings and its blue-green foliage amongst which the squirrels frisked and jumped, and of the long-headed blue woodpecker, with an odd appearance of want of balance in its very short tail, who crept up the trunk searching for insects in the crevices.

A movement in the room behind him made him turn, but it must have been the cat, who had gone

towards the door leading into the adjoining room, and was purring and rubbing himself against the curtain that hung over the door. But the next minute the servant reappeared. "I find I was mistaken, sir," she said, "and Miss Wilmot is not at home"—looking at him with the unblushing calmness of a London servant, educated into telling such lies without turning a hair, though Tom even flushed a little at such a barefaced untruth.

He was almost confident that Polly was standing just inside that curtain, which, as he looked at it, shook more than could be accounted for by the movements of the cat; and he could have declared that he heard a quick, gasping breath behind it.

Well, he had no wish to intrude if his society was unwelcome. Polly had quite a right to refuse to admit him, though why she should cherish such an aversion to him he could not at all imagine.

"Will you tell your mistress," he said, "that I should have been glad to see her to-day as I do not think I shall have another opportunity."

It was just then that he fancied there was that gasping breath behind the curtain; but if this was a little got-up bit of stage business, and Polly intended to make an effective appearance at the last moment, Tom did not feel at all inclined to fall in with the arrangement, and he stalked out of the room without another glance at the curtain, and turned a deaf ear to a very audible sob that followed him as he went.

"That's the nuisance," he said to himself as

he went down the stairs ; "that's the nuisance of this acting. A woman can't be natural, it gets into her whole life. Why ever could n't she have come in like a sensible woman and behaved like an ordinary human being, instead of humbugging behind that curtain ? I suppose she thought I should have forced my way past that stalwart young woman ! My conscience ! she could tell a lie with the best of them ! I ought to have said, 'Unhand me, scullion !' and torn away the curtain and revealed the guilty Polly in a touching and effective attitude, bathed in tears and fainting with emotion. And then tableau ! red fire and all the rest of it ! No, no, my young lady, it takes two to play at that game, and that's not at all my line ; thank you ! "

So Tom grumbled to himself as he made his way back to the Criterion ; and perhaps if he could have had a glimpse of the pretty drawing-room after his departure it would have strengthened his opinion of the staginess of the affair, though if the scene were got-up and artificial there was no audience to applaud, and it was undoubtedly excellently well done if it was intended to represent anguish too intense to be controlled.

May Primrose was never reckoned good at tragedy, but there was something exquisitely tragic in that slight figure that tottered from that curtained doorway as if blind to all except its own agony, and cast itself prone before the chair where Tom had been sitting, with the fair head on the carpet where his feet had been.

Bravo! First-rate! What wonderful delineations of feeling and emotion these clever actresses are capable of!

So it was all the more unfortunate that this talented young artiste was prevented by sudden illness from taking her usual part in the drama, "The Bird of Passage," at the Memnon, and the occupants of the stalls Nos. 46 and 47 were distinctly bored by the well-meaning efforts of Miss May Primrose's understudy. That young lady "went," in her own opinion—"more than one better"—and introduced just a touch of Sarah Bernhardt which she felt could not fail to tell on the audience, but which, as is often the case in playing with edged tools, proved fatal to the simple, natural charm which was Miss Primrose's strong point, and which had filled the Memnon night after night and covered a multitude of sins in the piece itself which were painfully apparent to-night.

So Miss Guendoline Cavendish writhed and palpitated, shrieked and whispered, and Tom yawned undisguisedly in his stall, and many another in the theatre did the same, who in presence of Miss Primrose's acting would have waxed a little bit choky in the throat and damp and misty in the eyes; and Boy, with the autocratical decision of youth, declared it to be "regular rot," and pointed the moral to his sleepy father over the oysters and chablis that concluded the evening, that it would be better on another occasion to leave the choice of the evening's entertainment to him.

CHAPTER XXIX

AN ENGAGEMENT

But earthlier happy is the rose distill'd
Than that, which, withering on the virgin thorn,
Grows, lives, and dies, in single blessedness.

—SHAKESPEARE.

THE county with one consent had agreed that it was a merciful dispensation of Providence that had removed Tom's low-born wife just at the time when he came into the Donnington property, and when her presence would have been an embarrassment, and nothing would persuade them to believe that Tom, with all the decent appearance of mourning he kept up, did not to a great degree share their sentiments. So likewise now they were unanimous in attributing to him feelings of disappointment amounting to rage and mortification, when the report crept about that Margaret Beresford was going to marry somebody else.

Some of them even went so far as to consider she had behaved badly in the matter, and the word "jilt" was even applied to her by wise old neighbors who had winked and looked preternaturally knowing when the two rode home together along the quiet country roads when the dusk was falling under

the beautiful bare trees, after the run in which she had followed his lead so pluckily across country.

"Cut out for one another!" these old wise-heads said with a chuckle; "any fool can see how it will be."

Others, who had been equally sure, blamed him for letting the grass grow under his feet, and by so doing having lost his chance.

"I tell you what it was," these would say, "he made a jolly deal too sure that he had only to say 'snip' for her to say 'snap,' as if it was likely a nice-looking girl like that, with a tidy little bit of money, too, would go begging or wait till he'd make up his mind. 'Gather ye rosebuds while ye may,' etc."

But even though some of them thought it was his fault, they all combined to pity Tom, and Tom was irritably conscious that he was regarded as wearing the willow, and that if he were not always on the broad grin he was considered to be in the dumps, and a sympathetic, cheering line of treatment was adopted towards him.

Perhaps, though he would have strenuously denied it, there was just a slight touch of soreness in his feeling, for even if you have not the slightest wish or intention to marry a girl, you are not always unfeignedly pleased at some one else marrying her, and it had never somehow occurred to his mind that Margaret Beresford would marry another man.

Perhaps those old friends of his were right in

thinking he had reckoned on her being ready to say "snap" to his "snip" if he ever worked himself up to the snipping point; but if this were so it was not altogether his fault, as his mother and Ann and all the country round had been putting it into his head any time these last ten years, and were ready to say "Bless you, my children" and "I told you so" and "I always said how it would be!"

And short of any idea of marrying, he and Margaret had been good friends, pleasant comrades having many interests in common, and the sudden appearance of this Colonel Blundell on the scene put an end to a good deal that had been pleasant and amusing; and, of course, after the wedding Margaret would pretty well pass out of his life, for the Blundell property was in Devonshire.

But Tom could not wear the willow, if that is the appropriate decoration for the loss of a friendship, lest people should think he was wearing it for the loss of a love.

It was not after all a sudden appearance of Hugh Blundell, for he had known Margaret since she was a little girl, and Tom had often met him in old days at the Beresfords' house. But he had been in India for ten years, during which he had cherished a warm memory of a plucky little girl on a rough pony, though he reckoned that she would have been snapped up long before he got back to England, and would have forgotten all about the raw young lieutenant who used gladly to escape from the formality of grown-up company, and go fishing and

bird-nesting or play with her and Harry in the gardens and park.

So when he found that Margaret was Margaret Beresford still—a fact which he set down, in spite of all Margaret's assurances, to her having refused every man within a radius of twenty miles—he resolved that if he could help it she should continue Margaret Beresford no longer, and he set himself to carry out this resolution with a solid directness that might have reduced a more obdurate stronghold.

I think Ann was the person who felt this new development most acutely, and she took a curious and unreasonable dislike to Colonel Blundell, who looked at her with such straight, honest, truthful and rather stupid eyes, a little puzzled at what Margaret could see to like so much in the little prim, quiet old maid, though he was prepared to swallow her whole as a divinity if Margaret insisted on that view of her character.

Ann could not get out of her mind, though she knew how absurd the feeling was, that it was something of a slight on Tom that Margaret, after caring for Tom—as Ann was positively sure any woman must who was for any time in his company—could have lowered her standard of a husband to what Ann unjustly considered the very dwarfish proportions of Hugh Blundell, as she never could be induced to do that simple-minded, true-hearted warrior justice.

I have never seen Ann more nearly approach to the typical, acidulated old maid than when she talked

of Margaret's future husband, though she was too kind-hearted to do so in the girl's presence, and only let her indirectly feel that she had not her friend's usual sympathy by her silence when his name was mentioned, and by a little drawing in of the corners of her usually sweet mouth and a hardening of her gentle eyes.

And next to Ann, I think, Boy felt the most objection to the marriage, Margaret having always seemed specially a belonging of his own—a playfellow, a brick, a good comrade, part of the holidays and home, so jolly and sensible and no humbug or rot about her. It made Boy a wiser and a better man those first holidays he came home after the engagement and came unprepared on Margaret and the colonel "spooning" in the conservatory.

Tom laughed till he cried at Boy's face of disgust and disillusionment. At fourteen there is something so unutterably contemptible in love-making, and especially in those who, to youthful eyes, appear well-nigh middle-aged if not elderly. Why, the colonel had distinct specks of gray in his close-cropped hair, which was beginning to thin a little, too, on the crown, and crow's-feet at the corners of his eyes. "He must be nearly as old as you," said Boy to that very antiquated person his father, who was guiltily conscious that it had not been altogether out of the question that he might have been in Colonel Blundell's place as Margaret's fiancé, and he wondered what Boy's feelings would have been in this case.

Margaret, too, Boy severely commented, was get-

ting on. "Why, I should n't wonder" — this with awful solemnity as if such an age should have placed her far out of reach of such youthful follies as matrimony — "I should n't wonder if she was thirty!"

"Nor should I," said Tom brutally. "But I've known blushing brides at seventy, and folly at any age."

Boy felt very bad about it, and kept out of Margaret's way so carefully that the Easter holidays were almost over before she ran him to earth in a corner of the drawing-room and would not let him escape.

"Why, Boy," she said, "my very particular old chum, won't you wish me joy? I've always been so glad when anything very jolly happened to you — when you made a lot of runs at cricket, or carried off the prize at a tennis tournament — and I always thought you would feel the same when I had a good turn."

There was a little tremble in Margaret's reproachful voice, which made Boy look quickly up at her and see that there was a moisture shining in her eyes. Forthwith Boy had both her hands in his and he was telling her how awfully glad he was, and he knew he had been a beast, but it was because he did not think any one half good enough for her.

And so they had a regular good old talk in that snug corner behind the piano in the Donnington drawing-room, and when Colonel Blundell's good-natured face and eyeglass appeared over the top of the piano, having always a tendency to appear

wherever Margaret might happen to be, I promptly sent about his business as those two so much to say to one another; and Boy could give points to the colonel that evening in the art of spooning, for I don't think he was ever allowed to hold Margaret's firm, capable hands at any public, nor was he privileged to have her shapely arm laid on his shoulder or passed round his neck.

Harry Beresford was at that dinner at Donrath after which Margaret and Boy had this reconciliation, and Tom found himself alone with him after supper on the terrace whither the gentlemen had adjourned for a smoke.

It was a pleasant, balmy April evening, the moon riding through hurrying clouds and the air full of all the marvellous sweet odors of early spring, brought out by a recent shower. The bedchamber windows were open, and the two men stood on the terrace just below where the two men stood, pouring out such a volume of sweetness that the other more modest perfumes were overwhelmed. The narcissus and daphne asserted themselves, drowned in its lusciousness, but farther along the terrace the narcissus and daphne asserted themselves, and the violets still made their gracious presence known.

Tom, as I think I have mentioned before, set Harry Beresford broadly as an ass, and the two men had very little in common; and the one subject which might have interested them both was just the question whether Tom altogether declined to enter upon him, and the very thought of it exasperated

and brought out strongly to his mind the asinine qualities of his companion.

But just now, indeed, the subject had pretty well faded from Tom's memory. Nothing further had been said to him of Harry's infatuation for Polly Wilmot, and the annoyance of that ineffectual call on his wife's cousin and his suspicion that she had palpably and rudely avoided seeing him had lost its sharpness with time, as had also the remembrance of that wonderful resemblance which had overwhelmed him in the booking-office of the Memnon.

He had seen Miss Primrose's name mentioned once or twice in the papers, but when he was up in London with Boy after Christmas he noticed that her name was no longer on the bills at the Memnon, and even if it had been he would scarcely have suggested to Boy to go there since it had been such a failure last time, and when there were so many attractions at the other theatres.

Once he had seen a paragraph in the paper that the talented young American actress was in bad health, and it crossed his mind to write and inquire, but he had decided not to do so seeing how roughly she had snubbed his friendly overtures before.

If there had been any fear of privation accompanying the bad health, Tom would not have been deterred by any memory of past snubbing or probability of future ones from going to the rescue of Susie's cousin, who had loved his young wife and cared for her so tenderly on her dying bed. But there could be no lack of means, he concluded,

remembering the pretty elegance of the Kensington flat.

Harry Beresford had made one or two attempts to lead up to the subject, and fancied that Tom was intentionally evading it, as he had done on former occasions when the young man had been inclined to wax confidential ; but really it was the invulnerable armour of unconsciousness that rendered Tom impervious to Harry Beresford's hints, and led him to abruptly introduce other topics when the theatre or Harry's friends in London were alluded to. In fact, Tom was giving very scanty attention to what was said, as from where he stood he could get a glimpse of the corner of the drawing-room where Margaret was making the *amende* to Boy and reducing that young rebel to his former absolute allegiance, and he was amused at the scene.

So he missed the beginning of one of Beresford's remarks and was only aware that he was describing some one as being ill and altogether in a queer sort of condition, so he tried a polite tone of concern, "Ah, indeed? Bad job!" hoping that his inattention and ignorance as to the sufferer in question might escape observation.

But if Harry Beresford was an ass, he had one of that animal's qualities— persistence we will call it, not obstinacy—and he had made up his mind to tell Tom Bannister about Miss Wilmot. He had got him now well into the corner of the terrace, from which he could not escape without laying violent hands on Harry standing guard over him and pushing him out

of the way, which would hardly have been possible treatment from a host to a guest.

"Was she a delicate, nervous sort of girl when you knew her?"

"Eh? Who? What?" said Tom, giving himself away and betraying his inattention.

"Why, Miss Wilmot. I was telling you how bad she'd been."

"Ah!" said Tom, stiffening; "sorry, I'm sure."

"Oh, yes," the boy went on eagerly—he was only a boy after all, Tom told himself, and a handsome boy too, he added, as the moon shone out on the young fellow's face animated by a subject that was plainly very near his heart. "Oh, yes, I know you were a bit put out about that call when you did n't see her; and there must have been some mistake. I could n't quite make out how it happened, for I knew she was at home and I'm quite sure she would have liked to see you, she so often—"

"My dear fellow," Tom interrupted, "I was not the least put out. A lady has a perfect right to receive whom she pleases, and as mine was a purely formal call the object was accomplished by my leaving a card. You are evidently under the impression that I knew Miss Wilmot very intimately in the old days, but that is quite a mistake, for though she was a cousin of my wife's I never saw much of her before my marriage, and nothing at all afterwards.—Now, shall we go into the drawing-room?" But as Harry drew back rather unwillingly to let his captive escape, Tom repented himself, feeling he had snapped the

lad up a little too short. "I'm very sorry to hear she is out of health," he said, "and perhaps you would tell her so if you see her again, with my kind remembrances."

"I'll tell her," said Beresford, "I'll be sure to tell her. She'll be awfully pleased; she talks such a lot about you. Do you know, I used to think at first she was jolly to me just because I knew you and Boy. By Jove! she was fond of him and no mistake! She's a photo of him when he was a kid, and she thinks such a lot of it; it fell down once behind the writing-table and could n't be found, and she made such a piece of work about it the maids had no peace until it turned up."

Tom found himself back in his old corner of the terrace with Beresford in front of him, and lit a cigarette, resignedly feeling he was in for it now, and hoping, with a sympathetic feeling, that the wedding guest had plenty of cigarettes when the ancient mariner tackled him.

Well, perhaps after all this was an opportunity of doing what Ann had asked him — to put in a word of seasonable advice.

"She never saw very much of Boy," he said; "but she was a good-natured sort of girl, and I dare say has a kind feeling for him for his mother's sake. Does she ever say anything of — her?"

It was so long since he had spoken of Susie to any one that his tongue faltered over the words, and he wondered, even before they were out of his mouth, what had impelled him to break the Sabbath silence

that surrounded her memory, and, above all, to do so to this young jackanapes.

"No, I don't think she has ever talked about your wife," said Harry.

And then while Tom was thinking that perhaps this was with her an affection too sacred to be spoken of to casual acquaintances, and feeling that Polly's reticence put him to shame for having spoken of Susie to Beresford, Harry added, "Only once she said anything, and then only that she was a silly little thing and never half good enough for you."

Which will show the reader the manner of man Harry Beresford was, and the amazing want of tact that led him to repeat such a remark to Susie's husband.

It was not very light just then for the moon had dipped in behind a feathery cloud, but there was light enough to show Harry Beresford, or perhaps there was an electrical feeling of storm in the air that made him feel that he had better clear out of Tom's way and make room for him to go back to the house, which he did, keeping silence with pain and grief for hospitality's sake from expressing his opinion of the vulgarity and bad taste both of the criticism and the repetition of it.

"What a fool I am!" Harry said to himself as he watched Tom's more than usually erect figure striding towards the drawing-room window — an opinion which his host would have thoroughly indorsed.

CHAPTER XXX

A VISIT TO BOY

A mother is a mother still,
The holiest thing alive.—COLERIDGE.

MARGARET BERESFORD'S marriage was to be at the end of May, which is of all months the sweetest for a wedding in spite of a feeling that lurks in many minds that it is unlucky. All the world is in bridal array just then, with white lilac above and lilies of the valley below, and wreaths and tendrils of white clematis tossing about over the cottage porches and thatched roofs, and the chestnut-trees lighting up their white tapers all around, and the guelder rose-trees covered with snowballs.

There was no reason for delay, for it had been arranged that the young couple—Boy must excuse the adjective, for newly-married people are always the young couple, I suppose because love never grows old—were to live at Rendle with Sir John.

"It won't be for very long," the old man said pitifully to Margaret after an ineffectual attempt to make up his mind that he could get on very well without her, and that he and Harry could live a jolly bachelor existence without any woman-folk to rout them out of comfortable ways.

Hugh Blundell had no objection as long as Mar-

garet was pleased. He would have consented to live in the moon, or have tried to do so, if she had wished it ; and his place in Devonshire was let to very satisfactory tenants, so after a somewhat lengthy honeymoon spent in Switzerland they were to come back and settle at Rendle in good time for the cub-hunting. Another factor in Colonel Blundell's and Margaret's willingness to agree to Sir John's proposal was that they would not get half as good hunting down in the Blundell neighborhood in Devonshire — and that is an inducement of which we who are not fox-hunters cannot estimate the strength.

The only misfortune about the date was that Boy could not be present, as it came in the very middle of the term ; and Tom was hard-hearted and would not consent to Boy's studies being broken in upon, as his progress was not as satisfactory as it should have been according to his father's perhaps too sanguine expectation, and his diligence was not highly commended by his house-master.

So, greatly to Boy's disgust, Margaret must be married without his benignant presence, and Margaret was so sorry about it that she even proposed to put the wedding off, and, failing that, went down one day when she was up in town trousseau buying, tearing herself from the hands of milliners and dress-makers to spend a long afternoon with Boy on the river — just they two in the sweet spring sunshine, under the willows in their youngest, freshest green, with the swallows darting overhead under the blue, blue sky.

Colonel Blundell felt decidedly aggrieved and thought a great deal too much fuss was made over that boy, for he himself could hardly get ten minutes with Margaret in all this very unnecessary fuss over clothes — as if Margaret did not put every other woman out of the running in her very simplest attire, to say nothing of her riding-habit.

So he saw her off at Paddington with a very injured expression, as she would not allow him to accompany her knowing that his presence would just spoil Boy's pleasure ; and he met her likewise on her return, with the first little budding display of marital authority and masterfulness, making Margaret feel that her free days of coming and going were at an end, and perhaps she rather liked the feeling that she was no longer her own mistress and was going in future to be taken care of and controlled.

Boy, however, did not realize that this was the last time he would have Margaret to himself, and enjoyed it thoroughly, including the lunch at the confectioner's with tarts many and various ; and he felt very distinguished and manly at being allowed to take her on the river, and hoped that some of the older fellows would see and envy him, only not watch his triumphant progress too long or closely as Boy was not yet the adept he afterwards became in the use of the sculls, and was very thankful to be quite out of sight of critical eyes before he caught a crab and required Margaret's help to recover his seat and his sculls.

Margaret took it so calmly, too, quite as a matter of course, as if catching crabs was a very usual per-



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'He was showing some lady round, and I ran up against him
on the bridge.'

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formance during a quiet row on the river, and she bravely concealed a certain amount of trepidation that now and then made itself felt, when their course became more than usually erratic. She wondered a little what her colonel would have said to the situation, and felt decidedly relieved when she and Boy were both safely on terra firma again, Boy being very hot and flushed but gratified beyond all description.

"By Jove! she did enjoy it!" he told one of his chums afterwards. "She doesn't often get a chance of a row as there's not much water about our parts, and the fellow she's going to marry—Colonel Blundell, you know—is an awfully good sort, but I don't fancy knows anything about rowing, and is rather an old duffer."

"Oh, I say, Margaret," he said as he was seeing her off at the station, "I'd almost forgotten to tell you—your brother was down here yesterday; he was showing some lady round, and I ran up against him on the bridge. He asked me to come along, but I'd promised Barkham to bike with him and could n't stop. Who was the lady? I could 't hear the name he said. Was she one of your people? I think I must have seen her at your house, for I seemed to know her face quite well."

"What was she like?" Margaret was a little bit serious. It was too bad of Harry if this was the person she guessed. She was sure Tom would not like it.

"She looked awfully ill, and she had great big eyes—I don't think I ever saw such big ones; and

they looked at one so hard, it made one feel quite funny. Hullo ! train's off. Good-bye. Take care of yourself ! ”

“ I shall speak to Harry,” Margaret determined as she went up, and the next opportunity when the brother and sister were alone she went at the subject with the same directness as she went at a fence in the hunting-field.

“ Who was it you took down to Eton and introduced to Boy Bannister ? ”

It was so very “ stand and deliver ” that Harry hesitated and turned red, and took up the defensive before he knew what he was about ; and when you have once taken up the defensive it implies that there is something to defend, and *qui s'excuse s'accuse*.

“ Well, I don't suppose there was any objection to my introducing Boy to any friend of mine.”

“ Who was it ? ”

“ Miss Wilmot, and — ”

“ Yes, I think there was the most serious objection. I am sure Mr. Bannister would not like it.”

“ Oh, come now,” Harry protested. “ I don't see why he should object. Miss Wilmot is a cousin of his wife's. Why, he goes to call upon her himself ; I met him one day just at her door.”

Margaret stopped for a minute, a little taken back by the new light on the subject. “ Then it was all the more reason not to do it,” she said ; “ if he knew Miss Wilmot in old days, and had wanted Boy to know her, he would have introduced him

himself. I think it was horridly bad taste for you to do it."

Harry pulled his moustache and fidgeted. Margaret was still something of the elder sister who was in a position to lecture and haul one over the coals, though the small brother had grown to man's estate.

"I did n't see there was any harm in it ; and she was so awfully anxious to see Boy for she knew him when he was quite a kid, and his mother too, quite well. By Jove ! Margaret, I should only like you to know her. I know what you think because she 's an actress ; but I can tell you there 's nothing a bit fast about her. I 'm sure you 'd like her if once you got to know her. And I tell you what, though she 's awfully good to me and lets me come and see her, she 's tremendously particular who she knows, and won 't have a lot of men hanging about as some of them do. And with me, I can tell you, there 's never a bit of love-making or stuff—I wish there were !" Harry added ruefully ; "and as for marrying me, if it 's any comfort to you to know it, she 'd as soon think of marrying the man in the moon as me."

"Then why? — "

"Yes, then you may well ask why she takes any notice of such a fellow as me. I wonder myself sometimes. But I think — don't you know? — that she 's sort of got used to me ; and she 's desperately lonely, as she don't care to go in for the fun and racket most of them like. And then she 's so ill ! a

lot worse than she 'll ever allow. Why, that day we went down to Eton she was so bad I thought I should never have got her home, so faint and queer and weak ; she seemed quite upset by seeing Boy, and I expect he brought back a lot of remembrance of old times, though of course she did n't tell me. And when I wanted to change the subject and began telling her about your wedding coming off, she got into such a strange, nervous state and would n't listen, and said she 'd known about it for ever so long — which, of course, she could n't, as it had n't been settled very long ; and I 've not talked about you to her for a long time now since we had a little sort of fall out about you."

That assurance of Harry's that love-making and marrying formed no part of his friendship with Miss Wilmot had produced a very reassuring and calming effect on Margaret, though, to be sure, she had only his word for it ; but there was something very ingenuous and simple about Harry, and an unmistakable tone of sincerity in his "I wish there were !" that carried conviction with it.

Now that she was entering on new relations in life and realized how absorbing they were likely to be, and how Hugh Blundell's wife would not have much time or sympathy to spare for any one else, she was inclined to look back a little remorsefully on her unmarried life, wondering if she had been all she might to this motherless young brother of hers with whom she had often been impatient and unsympathetic, treating him openly as the goose he

undoubtedly was, a mode of treatment that does not make the bird in question the least more intelligent or interesting. This feeling of regret at her past shortcomings made her now more than usually patient and attentive to Harry's confidences, which he was only too delighted to pour out.

" You know, Margaret," he went on, " I fancy she got into her head at one time that you were going to marry Bannister — and, upon my soul, I was not quite sure myself that there might n't be something in it ; but somehow she could n't bear the thought of it, I suppose because her cousin had been his first wife, and — it was too bad of me, I know — I used, just for a joke, you know, rather to keep up the notion and let slip little things about you and Bannister hunting together and all that, and you being so much at Donnington."

" How absurd ! " said Margaret, with that sublime forgetfulness of past possibilities that is characteristic of an assured present.

" She used to get so mad and yet she could n't resist asking questions, till at last we very nearly had a regular shindy about it, and I made up my mind I would n't say anything more about you, and I think she came to the same conclusion, for the subject was dropped ; and I don't think I even mentioned your engagement, as I did n't want to upset her as she was so weak and out of spirits. It was she who proposed going down to Windsor for an hour or two, and I was only too glad because I was sure a breath of country air would do her no end of good. I didn't know

why she wanted to go — you know I 'm not quick at seeing what people are driving at — till we got down, and then I thought she 'd like to see the state apartments or St. George's Chapel and the rest of the things, for she 'd never been there before. But she didn't seem to care for anything but to see Eton, and when I began talking of the chapel and one thing and another she got quite impatient with me and said she did n't care a snap for the place, it was Boy Bannister she wanted to see. And, as luck would have it, we met Boy on the bridge. She spotted him directly, though I might have passed without noticing him. He had something on, so he could n't stop except just for a minute or two ; and directly he was gone she said she was tired and would rather go home, so you can fancy she did not see much of Eton or Windsor either. And then, as I told you, I put my foot into it by talking of your marriage ; but, upon my word, I think she was too ill to know what she was talking about. I 've been round to-day to see how she is, but the maid said she was too unwell to see me ; and she did look awfully bad yesterday. You 're going down to-morrow, Margaret — are n't you ? — or else I 'd have got you to come with me and look her up. By Jove ! I wish I 'd thought of it sooner ; but I always felt before, don't you know ? — and you always snapped a fellow up so that I had n't a chance — but I 'm sure you two would get on like beans, if you once got to know one another."

Margaret smiled and sighed — smiled at the con-

firmation of her impression that this friendship of Harry's was of an altogether innocuous kind, for even a goose like Harry would hardly wish to involve his sister in anything doubtful. Smiling, too, at the thought of what Hugh would say to her being taken to call on an actress friend of her brother's and getting on "like beans;" but sighing at the renewed feeling of her lack of sympathy and her consciousness that the charge of "snapping up" was not unfounded.

But as she was going home next morning she was not obliged to decide between wounding Harry's feelings by declining his proposal, and outraging Hugh's sense of the proprieties.

CHAPTER XXXI

THE WEDDING

For her the spouse prepares the bridal ring,
For her white virgins hymeneals sing.—POPE.

THE wedding-day was as beautiful as only a day in May could be, and if happiness to a bride is augured from a little wintry, chilly gleam of sunshine grudgingly showing itself for a minute or two through a crevice in leaden clouds, a whole plethora of happiness might have been expected for Margaret to judge from the golden brightness of that sunny day.

Even Mrs. Bannister, who did not often go beyond the garden or a gentle drive in the park, could find no excuse for breaking her promise to Margaret that she would come to her wedding, even though that promise was fenced round with various provisos—*if* it were fine, *if* the wind were not in the east, *if* she had had a good night and her head were comfortable—any one of which seemed to offer such a large loophole of escape that Margaret shook her head with loving incredulity at such a very doubtful acceptance of the invitation.

But the sun smiled in so coaxingly that morning when Mrs. Bannister's maid drew up the blind and

awoke her mistress from such a tranquil sleep that not even the passionate love-songs of the nightingale in the lilacs under her window could disturb ; and a soft little wind fluttered white and pink petals from the horse-chestnuts into the bedroom window when the maid opened it, as a dainty little testimony that it was blowing straight from the west.

She was not a fanciful invalid and she really wanted to go and see Margaret married, or else the headache proviso would have turned in *faute de mieux* ; so Ann, when she came into the room, found her quite frivolously interested in her own wedding attire, with bright eyes and quite a pink color in her old cheeks, debating with seriousness the momentous question whether lavender or white strings looked best in her delightful drawn black satin bonnet, and which of her rare stock of old lace should ruffle softly round neck and wrists.

I do not think Ann had expended half the thought on her costume, and Mrs. Bannister felt a little reproved by the amused surprise in her daughter's gentle eyes, and was apologetic and affected an equal indifference till Tom came in with the loveliest spray of white roses veiled with maidenhair fern for his mother to wear, and was anxious to know every detail of the dress in which, as he said, she was to take the shine out of all the rest of the bridal party, young or old.

"Oh, Tom, how can you be so silly over your old mother? What does it matter what an old fossil like I am wears?"

"Now, you're fishing for compliments," Tom said, "and I shall not gratify your wicked vanity.—Come away, Ann, she must rest her very hardest all the morning so as to be up to the afternoon work."

Ann's services had been engaged for the whole day at Rendle to superintend the toilet of the bride, and it was no wonder Ann had bestowed so little thought on her own dress, so engrossed had she been with Margaret's. And, indeed, it was only when the wedding was alarmingly near and the services of the dressmakers hardly to be arrived at, that Margaret convicted her of having forgotten all about her own dress, and lectured her severely, with loving eyes, correcting all the hard things she said on the enormity of her conduct; and she was hustled off then and there to the county town and made to expend sorely begrudging money on clothes that could never by any possibility turn in for the use of old women in the village, or admit of being cut up and adapted for deserving infants in the schools.

But it was altogether delightful to Ann to array Margaret in her bridal attire, the lingering wish that it should have been as Tom's bride being soothed away by the undoubted clear light of happiness in Margaret's eyes and the perfect equanimity of Tom on the occasion. If those two would not be happy together in the way this benevolent fairy had intended, and for which she had planned and used innocent machinations, then she was well content that they should be happy apart in their own contrary fashion, as long as the fairy-tale ended for

these two that they lived happy ever after, whether they were happy apart or together was a mere detail.

So Ann, being required at Rendle to enact the part of mother to the bride, Tom was left to escort Mrs. Bannister to the church, and afterwards, if she felt equal to it, to take her on to Rendle for a short time to the big reception that was to follow the wedding, and to bring her home when she had had enough of it.

"I don't want to bring you away," she protested. "I can quite well come home by myself. I am not so helpless as that comes to."

"Now, don't be mean," he replied; "of all the things in the world I hate and abhor it's a wedding, and I shall be longing to come away long before you are ready, but I sha'n't have the ghost of an excuse unless I simulate, just for the occasion, the part of a devoted son, and if you unmask the deception I shall never forgive you. I've been planning all sorts of excuses for not going if you had n't been able to go. I even practised a swelled face this morning with a bit of bread in my cheek, but I was afraid of Ann. She's very tyrannical is Ann! — especially when it's anything to do with Margaret Beresford. I thought at one time she would have taken me by the collar and walked me up to propose to Margaret, and I used to get quite nervous when we three were alone together. So when you are in full blast of enjoyment — oh! I know how you carry on! — I shall come stalking up and declare you are tired and carry you off, and every one will look at me and say 'What a

devoted son ! how fortunate Mrs. Bannister is to have such a son ! ' Ah, poor things, they little know ! '

Tom was in great spirits as they drove along, full of boyish nonsense, so that it removed any lurking fancy in his mother's mind that there was the slightest feeling of pique at Margaret's having preferred Hugh Blundell.

He was so complimentary about her appearance that a soft little blush came up into her cheeks and a pleased light in her eyes, more from the dear old memory it called up of another Tom so like this son of his who used the same sweet flattery.

That was such a pleasant drive in the smoothly rolling brougham with the regular trot of the horses on the gravel, each of them with white favors on his ears, as also on the coats of the men and the coachman's whip — with the sun shining and the birds singing, and a wealth of young green on trees and hedges and grass, and the balmy spring air coming in so softly at the carriage window like a caress to mother and son that Tom had not the heart to shut it out.

Weddings are all so much alike that I do not think much is to be gained by a description of Margaret Beresford's ; and any poor words of mine would fall so far below the elegant and fluent account in the county paper, that I had better not attempt it lest invidious comparisons should be made by those who might have read that graphic description and waded through the list of presents which filled two columns of that newspaper, and counted how many

sets of saltcellars fell to the lot of the happy pair, and how many sets of afternoon teaspoons.

Suffice it to say that the wedding took place at Donnington, which was the nearest to Rendle, though the Beresfords generally attended Brenchly Church in the village the other side of their property. The wedding was at two o'clock, and there was the usual paraphernalia,—bridesmaids, small pages to hold the bride's train, village maidens to strew flowers, Mendelssohn's wedding march, "The voice that breathed o'er Eden," wedding guests in smart array, villagers pressing forward all agog to see the show, bells clashing and clanging, horses prancing, and all the rest of the business; and if the reader requires further details I must refer him to the county paper, which gives full particulars.

I think the only thing that was omitted, which used to be *de rigueur* at weddings but which of late seems to have gone out of fashion, was the tears, and the only approach to such nonsense was in the old eyes looking back over long years to weddings when the world was fifty years or so younger, some of them, as with Mrs. Bannister, looking across a grave.

The old house at Rendle was thronged with gay company. A big tent had been erected on the broad lawn before the house, the front of which had been disfigured by some ill-advised Beresford at the end of the last century by putting a heavy brick façade on to the picturesque old Tudor house. It was on this lawn that the first meet of the season was

always held, and the square sash windows were more accustomed to the sight of horses and hounds and pink coats than to gay dresses and flowers and ribbons and feathers that grouped themselves to-day round the entrance to the tent, where the wedding-cake stood in all its glory, with the light and elegant adjuncts that form the modern wedding feast in place of the cumbrous old wedding breakfast of former years.

This tent gave an opportunity to people — and how many there are who like to imagine difficulties even where none exist! — to wonder what on earth the Beresfords would have done if it had been a pouring wet day, as it so often is at the end of May, which seemed giving themselves unnecessary anxiety, as the sky was blue and cloudless and the sun shone without stint on the scene and on the great banks of rhododendron and azalea in royal masses of blossom.

On the lawn at the side of the house a band was playing, and when they stopped for a minute the sound of bells was wafted up from Donnington Church, and before Margaret took her departure, and while she stood on the broad steps bidding good-bye to her friends, and preparing to run the gauntlet of the rice that was plainly in store for her, the sound of a horn from the park drew the attention of all the party, and between the trees could be seen the pink coats of the huntsmen and the white and tan and black of the hounds coming up to bid their young deputy mistress good-bye.

In spite of all he had said beforehand Tom was

certainly enjoying himself very fairly, and there was no doubt, Mrs. Bannister was doing the same, for she was holding a perfect court in the sheltered corner where her chair had been placed, under the sunny west side of the house, where the magnolia was opening its great white cups round which the bees hummed so assiduously.

But after Margaret had gone Tom came to find her and carried her off to the brougham, leaving Ann to stand by and support the old squire, who looked rather forlorn and lonely and in need of "daughtering"—which, I think, is as admissible a word as "mothering," and quite as necessary an article though not always so obtainable.

Mrs. Bannister was obliged to confess to Tom, as they drove away, that she was a little bit tired, and he wrapped her up with that man's tenderness that is so comforting but so regardless of crushing ribbons and laces, and made her lie back against his shoulder— and a son's shoulder is a wonderfully resting sort of place for a mother's head.

He would not let her talk, though there were all sorts of remarks about the wedding and the people she had met that could hardly be repressed.

"I shall have Ann about my ears if I let you talk your head bad, though I don't know how she will ever tear herself away from old Beresford. I never saw such a creature as she is for taking everybody's troubles in hand—as if it was n't enough for her to have a troublesome, wrong-headed old mother who will do all sorts of imprudent and frivolous things,

racing about the country to weddings and junkettings, and an imbecile brother who can't take care of himself let alone her, and a mischievous monkey of a nephew who domineers over and imposes on her — but she must needs take the whole Beresford family on her devoted shoulders, worrying herself over Harry's flirtations, fussing over Margaret like an old hen with one chick when Margaret was much more competent to look after her, and now sympathizing, with tears in her eyes, over the old man's loneliness, feeling it — I would n't mind betting — a long way more than he does himself."

If Mrs. Bannister had not known that Ann had no more thorough appreciator than Tom, and that his words were just a futile attempt to disguise his admiration, she would have turned and rent him, sweet and gentle old lady as she was.

CHAPTER XXXII

"SUSAN, THE BELOVED WIFE"

See, my lord,
Would you not deem, it breathed ? and that those veins
Did verily bear blood ?—SHAKESPEARE.

"**I** WISH, Tom, you would just stop Barnett and see if I dropped my handkerchief in church."

They were passing the church at Donnington on their way home. The bells were silent for a few minutes, and the ringers had adjourned to the "Bannister Arms" to drink good health to the bride and bridegroom. Most of the villagers had deserted their cottages to make their way towards Rendle to see something of the doings there, so the place had a more than Sunday quiet about it, and there was no one to look out at cottage doors or bob curtsies as the brougham passed along the village street.

"Bother your handkerchief," Tom undutifully answered, at the same time letting down the window to stop the coachman, being one of that order of men described in the parable who said, "I go not and went." "You have plenty more at home, and I expect you've really got it in your pocket, which, of course, is entirely out of reach. I wonder why women have their pockets put in such incredibly

awkward positions? — Here, Barnett, stop at the church gate, will you?"

"I have not got it in my pocket, Tom," protested his mother, "because I missed it earlier in the afternoon; and it's a pretty one that Ann gave me and embroidered with my name."

But Tom was out of the carriage by this time, at the lichgate decorated with a wreath that already looked a little drooping and fatigued. The red carpet that had been laid along the path was still scattered with flowers that the village children had strewed before the bride.

"What are they about not to have rolled up the carpet?" Tom wondered, and looked about for some one to stir up to his duty in this respect; but seeing no one, remembered that it was the Beresfords' affair, not his, and passed on.

The carpet deadened the sound of his footsteps, and the heavy old door was ajar and swung back noiselessly so that there was no sound to break the silence in the little church, where the air was heavy with the scent of the lilies and lilac with which it was decorated.

The Donnington pew, where his mother had sat, was in the chancel, the hand of restoration not yet having swept away the barriers between rich and poor and put the laborer in uneasy proximity to the squire; and Tom made his way directly there, and had his hand on the pew door before he realized that the church was not empty and that some one was standing in the chancel looking up at the tablet, on which



For this vision—it could be nothing else—that he saw before
him was Susie.

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was inscribed, "Sacred to the memory of Susan, dearly loved wife of Thomas Bannister of Donnington, who died at New York, March 3, 1885. Aged 22. 'Behold the lilies of the field.'"

Tom was standing so near that he might have touched the small, slight figure that stood as still as the carved stone lilies round his young wife's name, but the first sight of the white face and the great eyes fixed on the tablet struck Tom as motionless, and he stood hardly daring to draw a breath, far less to stretch out a hand to touch what was no doubt impalpable and would vanish into thin air at a sound or a movement of his. For this vision—it could be nothing else—that he saw before him was Susie, of whom it was duly recorded on the wall above that she had died ten years ago at "New York, March 3, 1885. Aged 22. 'Behold the lilies of the field.'

I suppose it was only a minute, or even less, that he stood there spellbound; but such moments of intense feeling are outside the computation of human time, and may be a moment or eternity. Wise people tell us of dreams that they are even, as the Psalmist says, "a dream when one awaketh"—long adventures and catastrophes taking place in the few seconds when the mind is coming out of the wonderland of sleep into the commonplace of waking life. It was long enough for him to note, with a pang of impotent pity, the anguish of sorrow on the white face and in the yearning eyes, and to marvel why in that fair paradise where he had loved to think guileless souls like Susie's rested—that place where "naught approacheth, their

sweet peace to molest," where they are quietly resting "in the hand of God, and there shall no torment touch them"—why such suffering had been permitted to reach her, or why she had been allowed to come back into earth's shadows within reach of such pain?

He was desperately wondering if that love of his stronger than death, the death that them did part, could not reach across the great gulf to help and comfort her.

Then he heard a long, low sigh that seemed, soft as it was, to shake the slight figure, and then the arms were thrown up as if in passionate appeal against that stone testimony to the death of that dearly-loved wife.

And then, when as we know from all descriptions of spiritual manifestations, she should have vanished into thin air, leaving Tom rubbing his eyes in bewilderment and wondering at the vivid reality of the vision or optical delusion or hallucination that had bewitched his senses, the vision or optical delusion or hallucination, or whatever she might be, swayed forward as if stricken by the intensity of her feelings, and would have fallen if Tom had not caught her in his arms.

To catch a vision in your arms, to pillow upon your shoulder a head that had been these ten years in the grave, to pour passionate kisses on white lips that should long ago have mouldered in decay, surely such an experience has never been known or heard of in all the marvellous chronicles of the Psychical Society !

For a moment Tom was not sure that it was not, indeed, Susie's ghost he was holding to his heart. How could he well believe otherwise with that tablet just above recording her death? But with the conviction that it was no spirit but Susie herself that he held in his arms, came the deadly fear that the spirit had taken flight at the very moment of their reunion, and no longer inhabited the little fragile frame that lay so lifeless in his embrace, with dark lashes motionless on the waxen white cheek, and lips that returned no answer to his kisses, and from which, as he pressed them to his cheek, he could feel no breath issuing.

"Susie," he whispered. "Susie, don't you hear me? It's Tom."

The lashes quivered at the sound of the voice that would surely have followed and reached her far into the dark valley. The lips moved faintly as if to say his name, and at this reassurance that she was still living Tom hesitated no longer, but laying her gently down on the cushions under the tablet bearing her name — oh! how pitifully light and wasted she was! — he went out to the carriage where his mother was awaiting him and beginning to wonder at the delay.

"Mother," he said, "can you drive home without me, and send back the carriage? There is something I must see to here."

And he arranged the cushion afresh for her greater comfort, and tucked the rug carefully over her knees, and bid the footman see to it that every care was taken of his mistress when they reached Donnington

and that Mrs. Prior, her maid, was to be charged to see that she had a thorough rest.

Mrs. Bannister was too anxious to reassure him that she would be all right, and that he need not be anxious on her account if there were anything to detain him at the church, to notice any agitation in his look.

Indefinitely she connected the business that he had to see to with the red carpet that ought to have been removed, and wondered a little why he should have troubled about a thing that was no concern of his, and wondered still more that before he closed the carriage door he bent over and kissed her. He was not generally demonstrative in public; and she did not know — how should she? — nor, for the matter of that, did he, that this was more than a parting for half an hour.

When the carriage had driven off he hastened back into the church with the feeling that the vision might have vanished in those few minutes of his absence, and that he might find only the withered flowers from Margaret's wedding instead of her who was dead and is alive again, who was lost and is found.

But Susie still lay there where he had left her, and he carried her tenderly into the little quaint old vestry, so lately thronged with the wedding party signing the register, and finding some water sat down and raised the inanimate head softly to rest on his knee and sprinkled water on the small white face, and held the nerveless, unresponsive

hands, chafing them gently and pressing them to his lips.

He felt as if the very strength of his love could bring her back to life. Surely the cheeks were not quite so marble white ; and he could feel the fluttering breath when he bent his cheek to the pale lips, and once he fancied the dark lashes stirred as if the blue veined lids were about to rise.

Strange memories crept into his mind of Persephone first coming back from the kingdom of her dark lord to the flowery, sunlit plains of Enna.

Faint as a climate-changing bird that flies
All night across the darkness and at dawn
Falls on the threshold of his native land
And can no more — thou camest, oh my child,
Led upwards by the God of ghosts and dreams
Who laid thee at Eleusis, dazed and dumb.

And then again he thought of the little daughter to whom "Talitha cumi" was so lovingly said. Susie was coming back to him from the dead, from the grave with the carved lilies far away across the sea, from the paradise where sweet souls rest.

No one came into the church to disturb them, though Tom would not have stirred if all the world had been there to see. In those first minutes there was not the faintest thought of concealment, he would have been willing to proclaim from the church tower the glad tidings of his dead having come to life again ; and when the bells broke out again from the old belfrey with renewed energy, Tom almost felt

as if they were telling all the country round of his newly recovered happiness, instead of being inspired by Margaret's wedding and Colonel Blundell's lavish "douceurs."

Perhaps it was the sound of the bells that finally roused Susie to consciousness, for suddenly the dark lashes quivered and lifted and Susie looked straight up into Tom's face as he held her head on his arm.

She lay for a minute looking up at him with an odd, dreamy, incredulous look, as thirsty travellers in the desert may gaze at a mirage of green trees and flowing waters, knowing their unreality, but giving way to the refreshing fancy while it lasts before it fades away into the arid, sandy plain and pitiless, glaring sky.

"Susie!" he whispered, and she closed her eyes with a little shudder. It was too cruel that Tom's voice should be added to the mocking illusion, the tantalus cup held so near her parched lips which must go thirsty of Tom's love forevermore.

He put her hand to his lips and she opened her eyes again, but this time with a look of terror and an effort to raise her head from his arm and look beyond him through the open door into the church.

"Where is she?" Her lips formed the words inaudibly.

"Who?"

"Your wife."

"Why, here, little Susie, in my arms."

"But you were married to-day?"

"No, dearest, you forget. It is fourteen years ago."

"But—I don't understand—" Her voice was growing stronger: "They told me—I heard—don't you hear the bells?—and the flowers in the church—I was too late—you had gone when I got to the church—I wanted to see you once more and—your wife."

A sudden light struck on Tom's bewildered brain. "Did you think it was my wedding, Susie?" The light was coming back into her eyes, a tinge of color into her cheeks. "Did you think I was Margaret Beresford's bridegroom? Susie, sweetheart, did you really?"

And for all answer her arms stole up and clasped his neck as if they would never let him go again.

CHAPTER XXXIII

A HONEYMOON

Joy is but sorrow
While we know
It ends to-morrow.

Even so.—CHRISTINA ROSSETTI.

THERE is a honeymoon sometimes at the end of married life as well as at the beginning, and Tom and Susie spent theirs at a sweet, sunny, out-of-the-way seaside place in Brittany, one of those at which they had stopped in the first year after their marriage.

It was not quite so unconventional as it had been fourteen years before, which, perhaps, was a good thing, as Susie was too ill to be capable of roughing it, and Tom could not have endured any discomfort on her account.

The little *cabaret*, where the boy and girl husband and wife had lived so happily, had developed into a hotel with capabilities of comfort which had not been dreamed of in old days. But there were no particular attractions in the place to bring tourists there, and beyond parties of active-minded young people bicycling through, or stray artists who came and went, Tom and Susie had the place pretty much to themselves.

That was just and only what they wanted.

To sit and watch the wavelets as they flow,
 Two — side by side.
To see the gliding clouds that come and go,
 And mark them glide.
Beneath the willow where the brook is singing,
 To hear its song;
Nor feel while round us that sweet dream is clinging,
 The hours too long.

Tom had wished to take Susie there and then to Donnington ; but Susie, with her arms round his neck, had entreated that no one should know.

“ It is for such a little time, Tom,” she said ; and though Tom passionately protested that she should not leave him again, he could not look at the wan little face or kiss the small, wasted hands or hold her light weight in his strong arms, without the unwilling conviction that she was right.

The doctor also to whom he took her in London pityingly indorsed the opinion, though it went to his kindly heart to speak the hard truth to the desperately anxious husband who interrogated him almost resentfully, as if he had it in his power to give health back to the frail little wife who seemed to care so much less about it than her husband.

“ Take her away to some quiet, sunny place and keep her from excitement and anxiety, and feed her up and make her happy. Shall I write my prescription ? — fresh air, quiet, sunshine, and happiness.”

The doctor wondered a moment as they went away what the story of those two might be, and if the burning love in the husband’s eyes was kindled

by remorse. And then a fresh patient was shown in, and, perhaps, gave a glimpse of another life history, and the doctor forgot Tom and his wife.

But it was not only on the plea of its being such a short time that Susie entreated that no one should know.

"Think what people will say, Tom."

And he stoutly declared that he did not care a snap. And Susie, though she did care, more, however, for his sake than hers, loved him all the more deeply, and was all the more anxious that the memory of Susan, dearly-loved wife of Thomas Bannister, should remain sacred, and that no smirch should touch the lilies to which he had compared her.

"Tom," she said, "it is not only your wife but Boy's mother we must think of."

And then they sat a long time silent, hand in hand and cheek pressed to cheek, and Tom, by the magnetic power of love, understood how the mother's love was reaching out to shield her boy in future years from any sense of shame or slighting word or look about his mother. For who but Tom would believe, in the innocence of those ten years of absence in the glare of the footlights? She never doubted that Tom believed in her from that first moment when she clasped her arms about his neck.

Tom understood, too, that this wish of hers involved the bitter sacrifice of not seeing Boy again, and how great that sacrifice was he partly realized, though I don't think even a father can realize the

hungry yearning a mother has for the sight of her son.

"Am I not better to thee than ten sons?" he used to say to her when he saw that look come into her eyes which he recognized as the longing for Boy; and she would make him promise solemnly that if ever in a moment of weakness and wandering she asked for Boy, he would not be moved to send for him however hard she begged and entreated.

"You will not give way, Tom; you will be very firm, for you will know it is not I myself asking it."

So nobody knew why Tom Bannister disappeared the evening of Margaret's wedding-day. The coachman, when he returned to the church after taking Mrs. Bannister home, found the master with a lady whom the man concluded was one of the wedding guests who was going off by train, as the master placed her in the carriage and bade him drive her to Postham railway station.

"'And then you can drive home,' the master says," Barnett related, "'and give this note to your mistress.' So, perhaps, he'll have gone back to Rendle after all."

But in the evening Mrs. Bannister gave orders that the master's portmanteau was to be packed and sent off by the evening train to London; but I do not think the servants in any way connected Tom's departure with the belated wedding guest at the church.

Mrs. Bannister was puzzled, and so was Ann on her return home that night; for Tom's note was very

short, and only contained the information that he was called away on business and the request for his portmanteau. He added that they were not to expect him home till they heard.

Through Mrs. Prior they heard Barnett's report of the wedding guest whom he had driven from Donnington Church to the station.

"Very good-natured of Tom!" Ann said. "I wonder who she could have been. I expect it must have been one of the Blundell relations; there were several that I did n't know. I hope she came up to Rendle and had some refreshment. I'm afraid there was a bit of a muddle about the carriages bringing people up from the church; but Harry is not a bit of good at arranging anything."

They heard nothing more of Tom for several days, and then his letter bore a foreign postmark, and was not at all explicit. He was, he said, detained on business, and might not be home for some time; and he put off several engagements, and asked Ann to see after various matters of business and to write to him, care of Mr. Sargent, his lawyer (son of the old man of whom mention has been made earlier in the story).

"He will have my address," Tom wrote; and Mrs. Bannister and Ann wondered at this sudden mystery that had arisen with one who was generally so entirely open and boyishly transparent in all his doings. But they had implicit confidence in him that nothing could disturb, and they kept their wonderings loyally to themselves; and to all inquiring

friends treated this business of Tom's in a perfectly matter-of-fact way, and no one would have guessed how entirely in the dark they were about it.

But some of these inquiring friends put their own construction on Tom's sudden disappearance after Margaret's wedding, and concluded that he was, after all, a disappointed man ; and that though he had put a good face on the matter till the wedding was over, he had gone off directly afterwards out of the way of observation to recover as best he could.

Harry Beresford, perhaps, came nearer to the truth than most people, for when next he went to London, a month after the wedding, he found that Miss Wilmot had left her pretty flat and was gone nobody knew where. Her engagement at the Memnon had come to an end some time before on account of ill-health, and all he could glean by his inquiries there was that they believed she had become very much worse and had returned to America. Harry, as we have seen, was not very quick-witted, but it did occur to him as curious that Tom Bannister's departure had coincided so nearly with Miss Wilmot's.

" Not that Bannister ever seemed to care about her, and he cut up rather crusty that evening when I told him what she said of his wife ; but still — it looks queer ! "

But Harry's very elementary suspicions were allayed by finding that Tom had not gone to America, and all his efforts being in vain to find out where Miss Wilmot had gone in that great continent

— as they might equally have been even if she had happened to be there — he relapsed for a time into melancholy, from which he gradually recovered under the kindly auspices of a good-natured, rosy-cheeked young cousin as unlike Susie as possible, to whom he ultimately became engaged, and whom he finally married and lived happy with ever after.

“Bannister’s always awfully jolly to me,” he used to say to his bright little wife in days to come. “We’re quite chums now; but I tell you he used to snub me like beans, and treated me as if I were a perfect fool.”

“As I dare say you were!” said Mrs. Harry Beresford consolingly, rubbing up his hair.

“You will be kind to poor Harry Beresford,” Susie said to Tom. “I’m afraid I rather misled him, poor boy. I was so desperately anxious to hear of you and Boy, and for the sake of that I let him come and talk to me, and I am afraid he thought it was because I liked him. But he’s a good boy, Tom, and a gentleman, and I hope I have not done him any harm — though I’m afraid, from things he said, that his people took alarm, and I may have made them uncomfortable and anxious on his account.”

In those sweet, sunny days that hurried away all too fast, there did not seem time for many explanations, and there seemed no necessity. They were together — that was enough; and he hardly knew if she told him in words, or if he understood it without, as they sat hand locked in hand and cheek pressed to cheek.

He understood how, as the consciousness of her power of acting stirred and grew in her, and as it became clear to her that by her marriage with him she had cut herself off from realizing the bright dreams and vague ambitions that passed through her mind as she sat gazing into the ashy fire at Corsham Street — she simultaneously realized that he had given up all his prospects in life for her, had separated from his family and forfeited his inheritance, and ruined Boy's future as well as his own. This feeling had grown and strengthened and preyed upon her mind and made her miserable and suspicious of him, misinterpreting and mistrusting everything he did and said. How she and Polly had construed that first telegram from Donnington to mean that he was taking advantage of her absence to effect a reconciliation with his family, leaving her out of it, which, no doubt, had been his intention all along, and in her bitter feeling of anger and resentment she had consented to go with Polly.

Polly was very ill before they started, and quite unfit to go alone, and during the voyage and when they first landed Susie was absorbed in taking care of her. Polly's death came on Susie as a crushing and unexpected blow, though every one else had seen that it was inevitable ; and almost simultaneously with it came the news of Mr. Bannister's death and of Tom's inheritance.

" I think I was mad then, Tom — mad with grief for Polly, mad with the feeling how sorry you must be you had ever married me now that you were back

among your own people, and how much better it would be both for you and Boy if I were dead and out of the way. And I kept thinking if only it had been I that died and not Polly ; and then the idea came into my mind why should n't it be so, and I sent the telegram. And then everything seemed to help the deception : the doctor and nurse had always thought I was Miss Wilmot and Polly was Mrs. Carter (the name I meant to go by while I was away), and I had only to let the mistake go on. When I followed the company to Chicago the manager was very good to me. (If you ever get a chance, Tom, do a good turn to the old Signor.) Polly's name, May Primrose, was on the bills, and he let me take her place, though of course I made a mess of it at first ; but I think I had it in me, and I was so desperately anxious to earn my living and do something to keep me from thinking, thinking, thinking of you and Boy. And so it fell into my acting under Polly's name, and as I never meant to come to England again I thought it did n't matter ; and I thought by and by I should forget. But I never did, Tom ; the ache and the emptiness seemed to grow worse, and I could n't help every now and then going back to New York to see the grave of the dearly-loved wife. 'Behold the lilies of the field.' Tom, I think if I'd ever had any temptation to be wild or silly, these words would have kept me straight ; Tom's wife should always be as white and pure as he thought her, as worthy to be dearly loved by him. And then came the offer of the engagement at the Memnon,

and I was beginning to get ill then and weak, and I could n't resist the temptation of coming home to die, at any rate, in the same country as you."

An accident had brought her in contact with Harry Beresford, and from him she had learned that Tom had not married again and that Boy was a big boy at school. But the happiness of hearing this was soon poisoned by Harry Beresford's hints about Margaret and the probability of Tom's marrying her, and, as her health failed more and more, her one prevailing desire was that she might die before the marriage came off. That day when she had been to see Boy at Eton, she misunderstood Harry's words and thought it was Tom's marriage to Margaret that he was telling her of ; and when the wedding-day came an irresistible impulse overcame her, and she travelled down to Donnington, meaning, unseen herself, to look once more on Tom, and see his wife and Boy's new mother.

As I have said before, Tom hardly knew how much of this she told or how much he guessed or understood from her sweet eyes, or the mesmeric thrill as he held her little wasted hands to his heart.

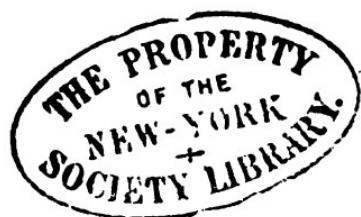
I do not think if some one we loved very much were given back to us from the dead, we should want a lot of explanation or ask curious questions, we should only be too glad to hold the dear, living hand and look into the dear eyes — it would be enough to be together again.

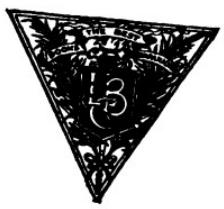
I do not think that Mary and Martha were full of curiosity and questioning when the great words, "Lazarus, come forth," were spoken ; they were

nxious more to loose the loved limbs from the grave-clothes and gaze into the face that had been dead our days.

And so I think it will be in heaven. When we wake up and meet, we shall be satisfied without any of earth's poor words of explanation.

When Tom came back to Donnington after that ix weeks' absence there was a radiance shining in his eyes that his mother had never seen there before — a brightness that will be on all faces when tears are wiped away for good and all, and partings are hings of the past ; and in answer to her questioning look, he said, as he kissed her, " Mother, I have been given a foretaste of heaven."





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